BALZAC IN SLIPPERS

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BALZAC IN SLIPPERS

PORTRAIT OF BALZAC AT THE AGE OF 34

Balzac in Slippers

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

OF

LÉON GOZLAN

NEW YORK

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY

1929

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The Translators

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CONTENTS

PART ONE 1

PART TWO 121

PART THREE 179

PART FOUR 221

PART FIVE 271

ILLUSTRATIONS

Portrait of Balzac at the age of 34 . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

Alfred de Musset and Honoré de Balzac . . 6

The Arrest of Vautrin 60

The Villa of *Les Jardies*, Ville d'Avary . . . 124

Balzac at Passy 148

Honoré de Balzac (Caricature by Unknown Artist) 164

Balzac — Danton's Comic Statue 184

Portrait of Balzac 274

PART ONE

Balzac in Slippers

PART ONE

I

IT IS rarely that men of distinction, arrived at a serious age, do not concern themselves, even unconsciously, with the picture which the world will paint of them when they exist only in name. The truth of this becomes apparent when one considers the care with which Montaigne, Rousseau, Voltaire, and a thousand others, groomed their shadows; Montaigne in those marvelous essays, Rousseau in his scandalous Confessions, Voltaire in his admirable Correspondence. They become obsequious courtiers, frank and imperturbable lovers of posterity. One might accuse these anxious sovereigns of sending their portraits to the Majesties of the Future, in order to learn, or rather to conjecture — for they never will really learn — how they will be received by them.

Balzac, or de Balzac — the 'de,' I believe, means nothing — avoided this almost universal practice.

He did not give himself for a moment to the thought that anyone would ever care to know, in addition to his books, his opinions, his character, the familiar details of his habits, of his participation, more or less great, in the monotony of everyday existence.

If it occurred to him, under the Oriental influence of coffee, as he sat between his best friend, Laurent Jan, and myself, to speak of the establishment which he hoped to set up when he retired, he construed it in proportions so colossal, so splendid, that Solomon himself would have retreated with all the haste that sandals permit, before the enormous expenditure involved. But later in the evening, when we had left the comforts of Versailles, and were re-entering Paris, these abstractions would suffer somewhat from the jolting of the coach and the difficulties of traffic, with the result that we would not care especially whether his establishment — this Pantheon of the future — was to be of bronze, of granite, of jasper, or of marble. It was not, however, that this vast sea — for Balzac was a sea — had no limits; it was only that he placed them so far off. He extended them so adventurously, at the suggestion of his terrible fancy, that infinity and nothingness impinged upon him. Often, after these projects — his dreams — he seemed to himself to be growing mad, and those who listened to him, completely so. In short, and to be exact, he was a living encyclopædia — as preposterous and as excellent.

He refused to consider anything by itself; for him each thing was related to another, this other, to still a thousand others. The atom, in his hands, became a world; the world, in its turn, became a universe. All that he wrote: articles, books, stories, dramas, comedies, was only the preface to what he intended to write; what he intended to write was only the preparation for further work, similarly generative. One could also say of his life what he said of each of his works: that it was only the preface to his life. He fell asleep on the steps before the entrance.

There was a short time, twelve or fifteen years ago, when the newspapers were much occupied with Balzac; but they treated him as they treat everyone, that is, hastily, and without reflection. They spoke only of his hair, his luggage, and his walking-stick. He was the lion of a fortnight — or let us say a year — and then was left in a magnified and grossly exaggerated condition. It must be admitted that it is the caricature of this extraordinary man which remains in the mind of the present generation. The fault, however, does not rest entirely upon the journalists. After filling the world with the noise of his triumphs — a world eager to see and touch the god whose miracles it had acknowledged — Balzac, who until then had lived in the secret places of meditation, suddenly put on *l'habit d'Humann,* donned a white waistcoat, raised the pillory of his cravat, caught up a gold walking-stick, and ventured into

the full light of the Opéra, there to strut amid the splendor of a stage-box, at the side of M. Veron. We see him repeating this gesture again and again throughout the winter: delighting in the show within the show. What sort of impression could these sensational appearances convey, except that of the slightly ridiculous?

Balzac was a lion, as the Dey of Algiers was a lion, or Don Pedro, or many other lesser personages. This was too much for one who up to that time had received so little. In condescending to show himself thus he misjudged not so much his own time as the future. He dazzled, he astonished, but he dazzled too completely — he could not be seen. He produced the effect of sunlight on ice. As a consequence he was seen but little — he was poorly seen; he was disfigured. The public will recover from this dazzlement; indeed it has already recovered; but it will be some time yet before it arrives at the point of calm and sober judgment, where the bubble of vanity is transformed to an aureole about the head of genius. After this violent explosion, Balzac was subdued, not into a calm, for he never knew that condition, but into a state of comparative isolation. He hung up his coat, threw his white cravat into a corner, and hid that ridiculous walking-stick of Alcibiades. The newspapers can say, in their defense, that they knew Balzac badly, that at first glance they placed him on a grotesque

pedestal. The fact of the matter is that Balzac made no effort to disclose himself, to let himself be studied from a favorable angle. He seldom went to plays; he was probably not seen three times in his life in the foyer of the Comédie-Française. I had the greatest difficulty keeping him in his seat at the first production of *Burgraves*. Every minute he was asking, like a fretful child, "Is it finished? When will this be over?" Yet he admired Victor Hugo tremendously. What he disliked was giving his attention long to any sort of spectacle.

We come back, then, to this: from the standpoint of his private life, Balzac is not understood. The reason is, as we have already said, that he did not care to groom his shadow.

If he did not appear frequently in the theatre, he did not appear much more frequently in society, which he only consented to penetrate a little after the success of one of his novels, when he was sure of justifying the enthusiastic attention that he so often inspired. In twenty years, therefore, it will be almost impossible to know the intimate peculiarities of Balzac, if one must depend upon the contemporary indiscretions of the newspapers, or on the revelations of men of the world, who, after all, write little. The world has held such varied and contradictory opinions of him, particularly during the two principal epochs of his literary life, that it will be of some value to future historians of this remarkable writer,

to explain here the difference between these opinions, and the reasons for their existence.

The great, the immense success of Balzac came to him through women: they worshipped in him a man who knew how, by ingenuity rather than by truth, to prolong for them the age of love — and chiefly the age of being loved. This gallantry, in forty or fifty octavo volumes, has exalted them with the fanaticism of a new religion. Balzac has created for them an imaginary country, a Palestine of the mind, an *Évangile* of love. It is a religion of love, no less, which he has founded. And, without question, it will endure.

To this first and tremendous element of success, he added another, which completed his theory of chivalry. Not only did he render these worthy women capable of being loved at an age when normally they would scarcely even remember having been loved; he also adopted the heroic expedient of presenting them always as victims — the victims of their characteristic infidelity!

He attempts, at the outset, to avoid a dangerous paradox: for few of the women in his charming and immortal creations are ever reproached. He excuses them; he goes farther, and lauds their faults to a point where one must doubt, if Balzac is to be believed, whether virtue and constancy would not render them less worthy of respect. Such concessions are not necessary to make us admire a gener-

ALFRED DE MUSSET AND HONORÉ DE BALZAC

ation which has only virtues with which to reproach itself.

This adoration marked Balzac's first step along the road to great renown. But alas! the spirit of adoration grew weak in the souls of many of his converts, for there came a day when he entered a world of more tangible passions; when he saw, and trembled before, the wickedness and audacity in the fawn-like eyes of Vautrin, when he looked upon the dark miseries that dwell in the corners of society, where fans are drawn before faces aflame with rouge. He, an elemental god, betrayed his own religion, and his followers came to hate him. The great ladies of the aristocracy looked askance at him; the *bourgeoises*, less courteous, frankly turned their backs.

This revolution, it must be admitted, did not much affect him. At the time he thought seriously of writing for the theatre, for having got one foot into reality, he was eager to get the other there. But such obstacles confronted him!

II

AS WE have said, the opinion of society scarcely affected him. After one broadside from the newspapers he returned to *Les Jardies,* bringing with him provisions for gaiety and philosophy, which he threw on the table — that table around which we so often awaited dinner for him until nine o'clock, but where we also frequently dined without waiting for him. The two homes in which he left the most vivid souvenirs of his habits are the little house at Passy, in the Rue Basse, and *Les Jardies,* the tiny, run-down estate which he bought in Ville-d'Avray. Just when he bought it I am not sure, but it cost him dearly, and he was always paying for it. No Indian or Chinese poem contains enough lines to equal the boresomeness of Balzac's life at *Les Jardies.* One can say that although for years he lived there, thought and worked there, he never actually inhabited the place. He was put up there rather than accommodated. Was this a real home — this cottage with green shutters, which never knew even the shadow of a chest of drawers, or the semblance of a curtain? The real habitation at *Les Jardies* was the one located in the same orchard enclosure,

twenty or thirty paces from his own — an almost possible house, where, in heaven knows what fit of prudence, he had stored his beautiful furniture from the Rue des Batailles, together with his valuable library. This building, so utterly devoid of architectural value, was at the time occupied by Madame V —— and her family. The famous dwelling at *Les Jardies* was built by Balzac directly facing this insignificant house. Although the grounds of the place are rich in rusticity, they offer so many inconveniences that one is bound to wonder at Balzac's choice of location. The land does not slope, it tumbles along the way from Sèvres to Ville-d'Avray.

It would be difficult, I believe, for a tree of any size to take root in such slanting ground. The scene-painters of the theatre might find it decidedly original, but it is terrifically antipathetical to the pleasure of walking. Landscape-gardeners, under the fantastic direction of Balzac, devoted the whole of several months to maintaining, by force of art and small rocks, these successive plateaus, which were always so ready to slip gaily down, one over the other, at the slightest rain. I have seen them working continually to repair these hanging gardens, as though they had been those of Semiramis. It drove them to despair.

I shall remember for a long time the astonishment which came over Frédérick Lemaître the day he arrived at *Les Jardies* to discuss with Balzac the

matter of putting Vautrin into rehearsal. In order to rest his feet, which had given out under him, he anchored them with two stones, exactly as one would support a piece of furniture on an uneven floor. When he resumed his walk, he threw away the rocks, or else carried them in his hands to use in a similar manner farther on. The maneuvre was very diverting to watch. Balzac alone retained his customary composure in the midst of this perpetual slipping. He possessed to an extraordinary degree that rare ability to seem to be taking no part in what went on around him. He could disconcert a thunder-clap. One can easily guess that land so difficult to fertilize would not offer shade to the pedestrian. It offered, in fact, not so much as a shadow. Perhaps, since that rather remote time, it has improved in substance and in vegetation; but then, good God! I can only compare it with the rocky peak of Ténériffe.

Yet we may as well admit that a single tree, an acrobatic tree, a fairly well-grown walnut tree, had actually taken root on this perilous slope. On a plateau of some size it had taken up its position of isolated dominance. If we mention this rather tardily it is because it had not always belonged to Balzac. The community of Sèvres, by a strange distribution of land, separated it (to Balzac's profit) from the rest of *Les Jardies*. It is always amusing to relate the history of this walnut tree; or perhaps

we should say, the comedy. However, comedy or history, we shall return to it.

Some lines from the Memoirs of Saint-Simon decided Balzac, who was searching for a rural location, in favor of *Les Jardies*. When Louis XIV lived at Versailles, his courtiers vied with each other in the building of country houses around Saint-Cloud, Meudon, Luciennes, Sèvres, Ville-d'Avray, and a thousand other communities adjacent to Versailles. It was then that *Les Jardies* emerged from the yellow, perpendicular mud; only to vanish when the monarchy came upon bad days. It was Balzac's wish to recover a bit of this past. He may, however, have been the victim of his imagination, at least in the matter of topography, for had this place actually been *Les Jardies?* I have heard doubts expressed on the subject. Sèvres and Ville-d'Avray have always denied Balzac's claim to *Les Jardies;* they have never called the place anything but *the vineyard of M. de Balzac*. At any rate, Balzac had scarcely got the outer walls up and the heavy, green, swinging-gate hung, when he had engraved in gold letters on a plaque of black marble fixed under the bell: *Les Jardies*.

The gate was put in place and swung on its hinges some time before the house, whose entrance it guarded, arose. The construction of the house was for a long time a subject of mirth among satirical Parisians, who are always lying in wait to detect

deficiencies in a distinguished man. Balzac had a great weakness for masonry. This weakness does not call for any apology for the building instinct is a highly respectable one, but still it should be realized that at this period, it was Balzac's only pleasure, his only relief from the strain of too much mental activity. It has been reported that in directing personally the construction of the lodge at *Les Jardies,* he forgot about the staircase. That he would allow no advice or comment, no suggestions from his architect or his masons, we must admit. But it is quite another matter to believe that he was so negligent as to overlook the need of a staircase in the house, and that one day the masons and the architect should have come to him and said, "M. de Balzac, the house is finished. When do you wish us to build a staircase?"

The matter does require an explanation. Balzac dreamed of spacious rooms and landings for *Les Jardies,* with plenty of light from all four directions; but in the building plans, the monstrous staircase devoured here the third of a room, there the half of another; it ruined the sketch made by the poetic crayon of the author. He attempted to curtail it, to distort it, to adjust it to the angles of the structure — but the building was too far along; there was not enough space left. The accursed staircase always came out wrong. The masons hurled their plaster at the ceiling; the architect broke the

arms of his compass. In one of these moments of desperation, Balzac evidently said to himself, "Since the staircase wishes to be master of my house, I will throw the staircase out the door." That is just what he did. His rooms then spread as they pleased, with no limits except the four walls, whereas, the staircase, in punishment for its bothersome pretensions, was relegated to the exterior of the house. Balzac could have pointed out that in Holland and Belgium many houses are built in this naïve manner, carrying their staircases on their backs, like baskets; but he always scorned the idea of explaining himself on the subject.

Balzac survived, but can we say as much for the staircase? Has it stood through all the hot and cold nights of our lovely France? I do not know. It would be inexact, however, to say that the interior of the house at *Les Jardies* was entirely devoid of the inconvenient convenience of staircases. It had several of minor importance, leading directly enough to wherever one wished to go, and for these Balzac planned rosewood facing and upholstery of purple velour.

What he planned for *Les Jardies* was infinite. On the bare walls of each room he wrote in charcoal a description of the rich furnishings which he intended to give it. Many years later, I read these inscriptions on the patient stucco surface:

Here a facing of Paros marble;
Here a stylobate of cedar wood;
Here a ceiling painting by Eugène Delacroix;
Here an Aubusson tapestry;
Here a fireplace of cipolin marble;
Here some doors in the Trianon style;
Here a mosaic parquet made of rare island woods.

These marvels never came nearer realization than the charcoal inscriptions. Balzac, however, did not mind joking about his ideal furnishings, and he laughed even more than I did when one day I wrote in very large letters on the wall of his own bare room:

HERE A PICTURE BY RAPHAEL,
PRICELESS, AND SUCH AS NO ONE
HAS EVER SEEN.

The only thing not lacking at *Les Jardies*. . . . But this is how the conversation went between Balzac and me regarding that harmonious fixture, invisible but real, with which he planned to surprise me:

"You have never noticed or admired the perfection which I have achieved in the furnishing of *Les Jardies*," he said. "It is so unusual and so ingenious that I can almost claim it as my own invention — though I should hesitate to refer to it as my masterpiece."

"No, my dear Balzac, I have not yet noticed this innovation, but if you will be good enough to. . . ."

"Look about you; what do you see?"

"Exactly what I have seen for some time: walls entirely free from vulgar objects that might hinder the unobstructed view. To employ a more explicit phrase: I see nothing at all."

"Look more carefully."

"Still nothing."

"But you are unwilling to try."

"No, I assure you!"

"Well, then, that is the best compliment you could pay my invention — your inability to perceive its existence. Otherwise it would have been imperfect, a failure, and would have had to be done over."

"But what is it?"

"Is it not ridiculous and stupid," he continued, "that for centuries wires should have been strung the length of walls, and that at the end of these wires one should see an enormous bell, as silly as it is indiscreet? Notice now the bell I have invented for gentlemen who dislike being jarred by the clang of iron — for scholars, for reflective men. One does not see the bell at all. Look for it! It is hidden in the wall at a point where it will never even be noticed. Hereafter one will not see a man ring any more than one will see him think. M. Scribe has already adopted this sort of bell, and is enchanted with it.

Each room at *Les Jardies* is fitted with one. Come and see if I am joking."

I followed Balzac, and he showed me, with considerable pride, in each room a model of his invention. Both of us, he through admiration for the inventor, I with the subservience of a courtier, thereupon indulged ourselves in the primitive pleasure of bell-ringing.

Without having been there, one could hardly imagine his delight in sounding this carillon, which proclaimed his triumph, and brought echoes from all the empty spaces of the building. So, there were plenty of sounds at *Les Jardies*, but when one had started them, few servants answered.

III

IT WAS in one of the lower rooms, on the ground-floor, that Balzac customarily dined, and it was here that he received us to dinner, which was served at six o'clock — at least for his friends. He himself arrived occasionally in time for dessert; often he did not appear at all. These irregular habits played havoc with his digestion. He drank only water; he ate little food, except fruit, of which he consumed a quantity. The fruit that he kept on the table was astonishingly beautiful and savory. His lips quivered, his eyes shone with pleasure, his hands trembled, at the sight of a heap of pears or luscious peaches. Not one would remain to tell of the annihilation of the others. He devoured them all. He was superb at this vegetarian Pantagruelism: his cravat removed, his shirt open, the fruit-knife in his hand; laughing, drinking water, cutting into the pulp of a dean's-pear, and — I should like to add, talking, but Balzac said little at table. He left off talking, laughed from time to time, softly, in the shy manner of a savage, or, if a remark pleased him, exploded like a bomb. He should have grown weary of this, but he never did. Finally, his chest expanded,

and his shoulders danced under his merry chin. The staunch Tourangeau came to the surface. We fancied that we saw Rabelais at the Manse of the Abbey of Thélème. He was especially pleased by an outburst of puns, very silly, very stupid, inspired by the wine, which, incidentally, was delicious.

There was a good deal of drinking at table — too much sometimes. Without casting reflections upon anyone in particular, I may say that more than once I left several members of that exalted company in a position decidedly below the level of the napery.

I shall always remember a celebrated Russian who from midnight until two o'clock wept bitterly over the sad fate of one of his friends, who had been condemned to spend the remainder of his life at Tobolsk, in the depths of Siberia. These lamentations over his no doubt excellent friend affected us so profoundly that we all attempted to outdo each other in crying, though we had a very hazy notion as to what it was all about. He (the friend) worked in the mines, and the more we drank, the deeper he descended into the bowels of the earth. By two o'clock he was plunged so far into bitumen, sulphur, mercury, and platinum, that we simply lost track of him. Some days afterwards, Balzac informed us that his villainous Russian had no friend at Tobolsk. He had admitted as much. We had been duped by Rhine wine and its various accomplices.

I have seen pass around this table celebrities of

all sorts, the most brilliant and the most sombre: Malaga, Séraphita, and Vautrin. Among the intellectual phenomena in the procession at *Les Jardies,* was the unforgettable Madame de Bocarmé, a woman who knew everything, and spoke well on every subject. She delighted Balzac with her uncanny erudition. One evening she described for me the island of Java, where she had spent four years — she was a thousand and twenty-three years old, this marvellous creature, yet she seemed no more than thirty — she described Java, its monuments, its monsters, its splendors, and its frightful maladies, in such a learned way, with such vivacity of expression, in colors so clear and brilliant, that the evening was made unique and memorable for me.

After dinner we usually had coffee on the terrace: Balzac's coffee was proverbially excellent. I doubt, indeed, if Voltaire's was superior. Such color! Such an aroma! He made it himself, or at least supervised its making. It was a masterly concoction, subtle, divine — like his own genius.

It was blended of three kinds of coffee-bean: bourbon, martinique, and mocha. The bourbon he bought on the Rue du Mont-Blanc (Chaussée-d'Antin); the martinique on the Rue des Vielles-Audriettes, from a grocer who surely ought never to forget his distinguished customer; the mocha in the suburb Saint-Germain, from a grocer on the Rue de l'Université. I do not know which he used the most

of, though I accompanied him once or twice on coffee-buying expeditions. It amounted to not less than half a day's traveling about Paris, but good coffee is worth that, and more. For me Balzac's coffee was the finest and most exquisite thing in existence — excepting his tea, for I should always except that.

The tea, fine as the tobacco of Latakieh, yellow as Venetian gold, undoubtedly lived up to the eulogy with which Balzac perfumed it before he permitted you to taste it. Really, though, it was necessary to go through some kind of initiation ceremony before you could enjoy this gustatory privilege. Balzac never desecrated it, and we ourselves did not drink it every day. On great occasions only did he take it from the *kamtschadale* box, where it was kept like a holy relic, and unwrapped it slowly from its envelope of silk paper covered with hieroglyphics.

Then he would commence, always with fresh enjoyment, for him and for us, the history of this famous golden tea. The sun ripened it only for the Emperor of China, he said. Certain mandarins of the first class were allowed, as a privilege belonging to their high birth, to water it and guard it on the stalk. A chosen band of virgins cut it ere the rising of the sun, and carried it, chanting, to the feet of the Emperor. This divine tea was produced in only one province of China, and that sacred province produced only a few pounds — enough for His Imperial

Majesty and the eldest sons of the royal house. As a special dispensation, the Emperor of China, during a time of prosperity, sent a few rare handfuls of it by caravan to the Emperor of Russia, and it was from the latter's minister, *via* the ambassador, that Balzac obtained the supply with which he regaled us. The last parcel containing yellow-golden tea which Balzac received from M. Humboldt had been delayed *en route*. It was sprinkled with human blood. Some *Kirguises,* and some *Tartares Nogaïs* had attacked the Russian caravan on its return trip, and only after a bloody combat did the caravan reach Moscow. One might say, indeed, that this was tea of the Argonauts.

The history of the expedition we have abbreviated considerably. It went on much further. And besides, there was the account of the amazing properties of this tea — too amazing! If one drank three cups of this golden tea, declared Balzac, one lost the sight of an eye; six cups, and one became totally blind. This was worth thinking about. Once, when Laurent Jan wished to drink another cup of this tea worthy of a place in the most fantastic portions of the *Thousand and One Nights,* he said:

"I'll risk an eye! Serve it!"

Rarely did Balzac spend the evening with his guests. He never did so when he was pressed by work. Immediately after dessert he said good-night and went to bed. Even in summer I have known him

to leave us at seven o'clock of a beautiful evening, and climb pensively to his room, where he would force himself to sleep, that he might rise at midnight and work until morning.

Such was his life — the life of a convict — atrocious, contrary to nature, murderous! However, without a ruinous routine, I doubt if a writer can dig a very deep furrow in the side of that everlasting mountain, at the foot of which he finds his tomb.

Probably no one ever lived more at night than Balzac. The complete silence of life and nature gave him the composure necessary to the creation of his masterpieces. A great ship seeks the wide sea and the limitless depths. It was while traversing the lonely woods of Ville d'Avray and Versailles that he carried on his meditations. He confessed to me that many times he found himself in dressing-gown and slippers, bare-headed, in the Place du Carrousel, after having spent the night wandering through woods and villages, over roads and across meadows. He would then mount a Versailles coach and return to Ville d'Avray by way of Sèvres, only forgetting to pay the conductor, for the simple reason that he had left *Les Jardies* without a cent in his pocket. This annoying discovery never surprised anyone, for all the conductors knew him, and Balzac himself was used to going about without any money on him. Another habit of his was never to carry a watch.

IV

IT WAS on one winter night that he was seized by the strangest notion of all. He left *Les Jardies* at midnight and proceeded, heaven knows how, to the Rue de Navarin, in Paris, to the house of his friend, Laurent Jan. It was around two o'clock in the morning when he knocked at the door. Laurent Jan, unprepared for such a visit, was sound asleep. Balzac knocked with might and main, awakened all the lodgers, and finally aroused the *concierge*, who was extremely indignant, as any *concierge* would be, at having his sweet dreams disturbed.

"What do you want? Who is there? Whom do you want? Who are you?" It was under this deluge of questions and maledictions that Balzac made his way to the quiet chamber of his friend. Very much alarmed by the apparition, Laurent Jan rubbed his eyes and sat up in bed:

"Is it really you, Prosper?"

"It is I," Balzac replied. "Get up; we are leaving."

"Leaving?"

"Yes, leaving. Get up and I will explain. . . ."

"No; before I get up I want to know where you are expecting to take me."

"Well then, rejoice! We leave at once for the land of the Mogul."

"Are you mad?"

"We shall be immensely rich, as rich as an empire — the Empire of the Mogul."

"Let's see now; before packing I should like to have explained a little more fully," objected Laurent Jan timidly, "just what we shall do in the land of the Mogul at this hour."

"Hurry!" cried Balzac. "We have lost more than a million while you were arguing about getting up. Time flies, and we have yet to find Gozlan. . . ."

"Oh, Gozlan goes with us?"

"He goes with us. I want him to share in the unlimited treasure which awaits us."

Laurent Jan arose, and resigning himself to becoming a hundred or two hundred times a millionaire, dressed, shivering, and then said to Balzac, who was stamping with impatience:

"Just a moment. Since I have agreed to follow you to the land of the Mogul, just what are we going to do when we get there?"

"What are we going to do?"

"Yes; that is surely a sensible question."

Balzac took Laurent Jan by the arm and led him mysteriously to the lamp:

"See that ring?"

"Certainly, I see it; it is worth four cents."

"Hush! Look more closely."

"It is worth six. We'll say no more about it."

"I want you to know," continued Balzac, "that this ring was given me in Vienna by the famous historian, M. de Hammer, the last time I was in Germany."

"Well?"

"Well, then! M. de Hammer smiled as he gave it to me, and said, 'Some day you will learn the value of this little gift.' I carried the ring about with me, never thinking of his remark. I looked on it as nothing more or less than a common green stone. . . ."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Now, there are some Arabic characters engraved on this stone, and these characters . . . But I am anticipating the great surprise which came to me yesterday, and which I am so anxious to share with you, that we may both share the treasure. . . . Yesterday, mind you, at the reception of the Ambassador to Naples, it occurred to me to have the Turkish Ambassador interpret these engraved characters for me. I showed him the ring. He had hardly glanced at it when he cried out so loudly that everyone was startled. 'You have a ring,' he exclaimed, bowing to the floor, 'which comes from the Prophet. About a hundred years ago it was stolen from the Great Mogul by the Eng-

lish. Later it fell into the hands of a German prince . . .' I interrupted him: 'It was in Vienna that it was given me, by M. de Hammer!' 'Go at once,' said the Ambassador, 'to the Empire of the Great Mogul. He has offered tons of gold and diamonds to the one who returns the ring of the Prophet. You will come back laden with riches.' You can imagine how I leaped with excitement. I came at once to find you, my dear Jan, so that we may get Gozlan and all go to the Great Mogul, who will be transported with ecstasy, and restore to him the ring of the Prophet. Come, the tons of riches await us!"

"And it is for this that you have got me up in the middle of the night!" exclaimed Jan.

"What! Do you think I exaggerate its value?" cried Balzac, bewildered by the indifference of his friend toward the fascinating prospect opened up by the discovery of the ring.

"I stand by the first offer I made you," said Jan as he began undressing. "Will you take four cents for the ring of the Prophet?"

It would be impossible to record all the anathema which Balzac heaped on Jan's scepticism. With a passionate and terrible violence, like that of an enraged lion, Balzac stormed; but at last, worn out by his fury, he lay down on the floor and slept until morning, dreaming of the treasures of the Great Mogul. It was thus that Laurent Jan and I escaped

a voyage to the Empire of the Mogul — a voyage which still awaits us. Balzac always spoke very discreetly, thereafter, about the ring of the Prophet; and we seldom saw it on his finger.

These dreams of riches, these dreams embellished with diamonds, did not exist in Balzac's imagination without cause. If he grew excited under the influence of a dazzling nightmare, it was because he had *Les Jardies* on his mind, and *Les Jardies* cost him a great deal, yet gave him nothing in return — save weariness, labor and worries without end. I have sometimes found Balzac at home in the morning looking greener than the leaves on his trees, all from having suffered so much in the rôle of landowner. I know a wall, not more than ten metres long by two high, which deserves fame no less than the walls of Thebes, of Troy, of Rome, or the Great Wall of China. This wall separated the upper part of Balzac's property (note particularly that I do not say all of his property) from the upper part of a neighbor's property — no matter what neighbor; all neighbors are alike. To understand this situation, imagine two beds whose pillows touch, but which are divided down the middle by wooden valances.

The land belonging to Balzac, already higher than the land adjoining, he raised several feet higher yet, with the result that a retaining wall was found necessary, to keep the added soil from falling onto

the neighbor's property. So much for the origin of the famous wall at *Les Jardies;* the history of its misfortunes is the history of Balzac's tortures. It had hardly been raised when it gave way and scattered its lime and stones on all sides — on Balzac's land, and on that of his neighbor. Balzac sighed and rebuilt it. He was told by experts that the slope had not been steep enough; that if one were to increase the angle of resistance, the wall would not fall again. A month was required to reconstruct it along these lines. We were all happy over its completion. That morning it rained. In the evening we were playing dominoes in a room off the main corridor of the house, when someone knocked, and then quickly threw open the window:

"Monsieur de Balzac!"

"What is it?"

"Your wall has started toward the neighbor's!"

"Impossible!"

"Absolutely."

We secured lights and hurried to the fatal spot. It was a splendid sight. The entire wall, overturned on its foundation, was stretched full length on the neighbor's ground. For several minutes we gazed on the disaster. The next morning the tragedy was completed for Balzac by a multitude of summonses, verbal law-suits, writs, assignations, *etc. etc.* This time, in falling, the wall had flattened some turnips, crushed some carrots, and smashed some parsnips.

Heaven knows what the death of those miserable vegetables cost! In France only the death of a man can atone for the death of an apple- or a cherry-tree. People are afraid the respect for property may decrease. Personally I have always feared the contrary. But to continue. For the third time it was necessary to prop up the decrepit wall. More architects were called into consultation.

"The angle of resistance is sufficient," said they, "but the foundations should be made of brick and Roman cement. Brick is the only thing to use."

"We will build it of brick," muttered Balzac, hurling a magnificent look of black defiance at the heavens, where his own spirit was reflected.

He agreed, then, that the wall should be built of brick. It was done so thoroughly that the architects' bills were enormous. (Architects themselves are made of brick). Thrice have I felled, and thrice erected, before the eyes of the reader, this wall of Ilion, but I can swear that actually it was upset and replaced more than five times. Weary of war, Balzac ended by buying the piece of land on which his wall liked to tumble. Then he said, with some pride:

"It is costly, but it is worth it. One is always glad to be able to collapse at home. Now my poor wall can at least die in its own bed."

Soon I shall take my place, with the reader, on the

high terrace beside this whimsical wall — the terrace from which Balzac loved to look out over the cool, dark woods of Ville d'Avray, and I shall recount my interview with him the morning of the first, last and only performance of *Vautrin*.

V

BALZAC had unexpected dramatic fits which, according to the various temperatures through which his inflammable spirit passed, resembled tempests or tornadoes; but never did he exhibit a serious and steady desire for a theatrical career. These fits usually seized him when he got within close range of a highly successful play. The fumes of wine drunk elsewhere then enveloped him, and mounted swiftly to his brain. For a rapturous month, or perhaps two, he dreamed only of the drama: historical drama, passionate melodrama, the comedy of manners, plays for the Comédie-Française, plays for the Porte-Saint-Martin, plays for the Gaieté. The very points of his pen quivered. He was going to work! . . . Oh, how he was going to work! For M. Samson, for Mme Dorval, for Frédérick Lemaître. Especially for the latter, whom at that time he admired with absolute fanaticism, and whose fine feeling and magnetism he fully appreciated.

I have rarely seen Mlle Rachel myself, but Balzac placed her a little below the level of great artists — just why he never explained. Nothing was

further from the natural tendency of his complex imagination than bare tragedy. Nor could any force, great or small, lead him toward poetry. Do not misunderstand me. I mean here by poetry only rhymed verse. It would be a mistake to say that Balzac did not love idealistic thought, well-chosen images, a refined style, and certain delightful and long-established conventions. He liked poetry, but he did not like verse, and that's all there was to it! He respected verse tremendously, but he could not bring himself to read it. He appreciated its difficulties, but scattered his praise at random, on the wing, and, as a sportsman would say, shot 'at a guess.' When he had recited some fragments from *Méditations* or the *Orientales,* eulogizing Racine because he had heard that that writer, like himself, excelled in the portrayal of women, his tithe of enthusiasm for poetry was paid. With the receipt in his pocket he then could return contentedly to his prose, and for a long time afterwards there would be no talk about verse at *Les Jardies.*

In order to illustrate further Balzac's tolerant attitude toward poetry, I shall take the liberty of recalling an evening — a famous evening! — when he and I attended the Théâtre-Français. It was the première of *Burgraves,* and Victor Hugo had sent us two tickets for the balcony. The fate of the play was not long in doubt. Exclamations of disapproval, laughter, mutterings, mockery, hisses, clashed in

mid-air beneath us, above us, in front and behind. — A veritable war! — The baptism of dramatic small-shot to which we all were exposed, from the highest to the lowest, rained down like big and little hail-stones, mercilessly, without pity on either Otto or Guanumara. The spirit of the occasion was a general gaiety, a diabolical jubilee; it was the putrid laughter of a first night failure. The envious laughed blackly, the friendly laughed lemon-yellow; the public, that great baby, laughed stupidly because it felt like laughing.

Suddenly I felt myself being tapped on the shoulder. It was Balzac, who was sitting behind me. I turned and saw that he, too, was laughing, but on the sly, in the manner of a conspirator, and in such a way as to make me an accomplice to the poisonous hilarity with which he was affected.

"How do you like this?" he asked.

I replied seriously: "I think it is wonderful. Take my word for it, not since Dante has anything so beautiful been written in any language. It is great; it is sublime."

"Just what I think," agreed Balzac, who had paid no attention to what I said, or perhaps had waited until I spoke before taking sides in the question which was being threshed out before us.

In brief, *Burgraves* went sky-high in his estimation that evening. And this is only one example of

his inability to perceive thought beneath the fantastic cloak of verse.

When the dramatic fever seized him, it not only impelled him to discard all the ideas expressed or to be expressed in his novels, so that he might be free to write comedies and dramas for the Paris theatres; it also made him — Balzac, the independent, the close-minded! — willing to seek ideas of others, to entertain suggestions of collaboration, to consider the financial aspect of things! The moment an idea cropped up, it was considered from the business angle. That is how the theatrical element worked in him. Listen to his words:

"The idea I have is a grand one; it is brilliant and solid; it is rose-granite. From this granite we are going to carve, in great Egyptian blocks, a play for the Porte-Saint-Martin. I have Frédérick's promise. And with Frédérick — there is not a bit of doubt — it will mean at least a hundred and fifty performances at an average of five thousand francs. Think of it: SEVEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY THOUSAND FRANCS! Now figure it out. Twelve percent for author's royalties will bring us more than twenty thousand francs. And that does not take into account the tickets, on which Porcher, whom I have already seen, will advance as usual five or six thousand francs in gold. Further, there is our share from the sale of ten thousand copies of the play. Three francs

a copy — a clear profit of thirty thousand francs. In addition to all this there is . . ."

It can be seen that, just as I have said, everything turned to business for Balzac, even before the idea was a perceptible germ. Before he had the thing clearly in mind even, he hurried to the Bourse to have it copyrighted. It was in the Place de la Bourse that he one day met Henry Monnier, whom he liked and admired very much. Monnier listened to one of Balzac's magnificent schemes, which was to net them each fourteen million and then said:

"Advance me a hundred sous on the idea."

We have already stated that when he was bitten by the theatre bug, Balzac would welcome collaborators with open arms. It was at such a time that he lured, along with several others, to *Les Jardies,* a good but weak young man named Lassailly — a wavering and dreamy spirit whom God has since called to him. Balzac had cast his eye on this uncertain intellect with the intention of making him his dramatic collaborator — a task of which the boy was as incapable as he was of writing *Eugénie Grandet* or *Le Lis dans la Vallée.* It was utterly impossible for me, and for others as well, to divine what strange reason Balzac had in making such a choice. Raphael engaging a stone-cutter from Transtevere or a slater from Ostie to help him paint his pictures would not have been more bizarre.

Although one needs testimony to believe it,

Balzac was sufficiently serious in the matter to honor Lassailly with a promise of his collaboration over a period of years. Was this agreement ever recorded? Was it drawn up in legal form? Was it written at all? I do not know, and I doubt if it was. But it is well known now that the terms of the agreement were discussed and decided upon. I can even affirm, from my recollections and from the recollections of others, that at the time of which we speak, the terms were fairly well understood. The principal condition was that Lassailly, chosen by a strange fate to be Balzac's official collaborator, should be comfortably lodged, furnished with heat, light, food, *etc.*, at Balzac's expense, and that he in turn should keep himself constantly at the disposal of Balzac, furnishing him with dramatic ideas, plots, and whatever might be needed, whenever such need arose.

To Balzac's credit it may be said that Lassailly was immediately so well put up at *Les Jardies*, so quickly and thoroughly accommodated with heat, light, and nourishment, that in a very few days he acquired a plumpness which one could scarcely have expected from a person of so delicate a constitution. Balzac, we maintain, was thereupon fully acquitted of any further responsibility in the matter of the contract.

And how did Lassailly fulfill his obligations? He slumbered lazily in complete idleness. He did not neglect any of his meals, but he neglected utterly the

dramatic ideas which he was to have contributed. His attitude was certainly not that of an employe, or, if you prefer, an associate. Balzac pleaded with him, justly enough, to fulfill his obligations, and Lassailly admitted that Balzac's demands were entirely legitimate. It was a problematical state of affairs, painful and full of disagreement. Another consideration was that Balzac worked almost exclusively at night. It would therefore be at two or three in the morning that he would call imperiously to Lassailly and demand that he get up and work with him.

What a terrible moment it would be! The timid collaborator, stretching sleepily, would hurriedly dress, or half-dress, and with one foot bare, the other shod, his cotton cap pulled over one ear, his face filled with consternation (and Lassailly was capable of awful consternation!) would run as softly as possible, a candle-stick in his hand, through the deserted rooms which lay between him and Balzac's lonely study. Pathetic journey! Arrived at the feet of the master, a master pale with sleeplessness, yellowed by the splotches of light which fell upon his brow and cheeks, (for the Balzac possessed at night by the demon of labor had nothing in common with the Balzac of the street and salon), the master would say to him:

"Well now, Lassailly, what have you thought up?"

And Lassailly, adjusting his cotton cap, and opening wide his eyes still covered with a film of dreams, would stammer:

"Yes . . . we will have to think up . . . it will be a good thing to . . . to hit on something . . ."

"Oh, you have hit on something! Well, let's hear about it. The Porte-Saint-Martin is waiting. Let's hurry! Harel wrote me again yesterday. So let's hear about it! I saw Frédérick Lemaître the day before yesterday. . . ."

"Oh, you saw Frédérick Lemaître?"

"Yes, and he is all for us. He longs for a play that will set Paris talking. Now where is this play? Eh?"

"Eh?" Lassailly would repeat, his forehead wrinkled from the difficulty of paying attention.

"Have you this play, Lassailly?"

"Not finished, but . . ."

"But you have it partially done?"

"Yes, and no."

"What do you mean?"

"I had rather you told me first," Lassailly would murmur, "what ideas you have. Then we can put them with mine, and I am sure . . ."

"Lassailly, you are asleep!"

"Oh, no!"

"But you are! . . . You're asleep standing up, I tell you. See there! Your eyes are shut!"

"I swear . . ."

"You are yawning!"

"I am a trifle chilly . . . that is . . ."

"Go back to bed, Lassailly. Perhaps in an hour or so the muse will visit you."

Then, picking up his pale candle, and dragging his slippered feet as he went, Lassailly, like a desolate ghost, would return to his own room, to the soft bed where he was supposed to discover, as he lay stretched out, the theme of this famous play which was to be the talk of Paris. — His rest would be brief. In an hour Balzac would have bells ringing all over the place, to rouse Lassailly from his slumbers. The poor boy would start up and run barefooted, clothed only in his knitted drawers, to his master's study. There he would dissemble as best he could, and the dialogue previously indulged in would be repeated — Balzac as alert as a lion, Lassailly as passive as a dormouse. One can imagine that the results were always the same. Balzac wanted a play at any price. Lassailly could uncover one at no price. As many as six times a night the excellent but sterile collaborator would be called upon by his literary chief. The problem was much more a physical than a mental one.

The upshot of it all was that Lassailly, in spite of better and better nourishment and care, grew pale, declined, and fell seriously ill. These sudden awakenings at night, together with his utter incapability of fulfilling the terms of the contract, troubled his poor mind. Encountering him one day

on the Boulevard de Gand, at the corner of the Rue Laffitte, I asked:

"Well, how are things at *Les Jardies?*"

"Oh, I have left *Les Jardies,*" he replied, raising his arms and his eyes to heaven — those eyes which were always filled with a mist of tears — "I have left it forever."

"But you were well off there, weren't you?"

"Very well off! What a wonderful place to live! Such surroundings! Such a pleasant existence! Roasts every day; vegetables twice a day; plenty of desserts; and such coffee!"

"Well then, what happened that made you leave?"

"You ask what happened! Who could possibly stay there? Getting up six times, perhaps eight times a night! Eight times! And that is not all. A pistol at your throat forcing you to invent a play that would take Paris by storm. Human endurance," continued Lassailly in tears, "is not equal to it. I, who had already suffered so many passions and vicissitudes, could tolerate it no longer. Never as long as I live will I set foot again in *Les Jardies.*"

He kept his word. Not only did he never return to *Les Jardies;* he never uttered the name of Balzac except in a kind of half-terror.

VI

GIVING in finally to these irresistible impulses toward the theatre, Balzac determined to brave the dramatic sea, and round the Cape of Storms. In my opinion the time was badly chosen, the occasion the worst possible. It was too late — much too late. Not that Balzac was too old to master an admittedly difficult art, for a strong intellectual constitution can bear up to the very end — but it was too late for the one and sufficient reason that Balzac was at that period of his life entirely too celebrated a figure to be forgiven a fresh conquest, an attempt to win glory in a new field, the most envied of all fields, the theatre.

What! Was it not enough to be read and admired in every salon of France, Italy, England, Germany, and Russia? To be translated into every language? Having received the delicate applause of hearts and eyes, must he seek also the loud applause of hands? Really this man must think himself a Charlemagne, a Charles the Fifth. He dreams of a world-wide literary monarchy!

In these astonished questions there was a clear declaration of war against the daring author. How

could Balzac fail to perceive it — he, the subtle inquisitor of all ideas; he, as clever and sharp-eyed as an old police magistrate; he who had so often stripped off, skin and all, the mask from the face of humanity? Could he not know that the envy, the hatred, the jealousy of those who were unable to attack his irritatingly successful books, could lie safely hidden in the dark corners of a theatre-box, and from that vantage-point kill at leisure the play and the author — their pleasure in killing increasing with the beauty of the play and the greatness of the author? This danger is much less great, though it is always present, when the writer takes care to keep a foot in each camp: one in literature, the other in the theatre, and raises himself a bit at a time, first in one place, then in the other. It was this method which lifted Voltaire to the plane of genius, and Frédéric Soulié to the plane of talent. Balzac overlooked these tactics, and he was beaten, constantly beaten. There is not the slightest doubt of it. The so-called success of two or three of his comedies performed since his death does not constitute an argument to the contrary. So long as he was not present at their performance, why should anyone hiss? Besides, there is no danger of his writing more! — What an advantage! — And besides that, he is dead! — What a virtue!

Prudence was, then, completely lacking in Balzac's resolution to write so tardily for the theatre.

Having committed this folly, he proceeded to increase the feeling which had been aroused against him. Was it not deliberately to increase it that he invaded the theatre, armed with the most ticklish, the most dangerous subject in the whole collection of French public prejudices?

The French public — is it not made up of six times as many hypocrites as one would ordinarily find in a first-night audience? Of six times as many fraudulent bankrupts, and debauched women as hang over the railings of stage-boxes and balcony; six times as many members of the goitrous *bourgeoisie,* cretins, idiots, cripples, and villains as fill the second and third galleries at a *première* (and do not think this an exaggeration, either); it is an assemblage hidebound by the purest literary principles, the purest religious principles, the purest social principles, by all the purest principles imaginable. Beware! No subject must be even slightly dangerous; no person very eccentric; no style too new. The daring spirits who are ingenious, and who dream of outwitting these ambushes and traps, do not employ the tricks of the writer, but rather the tricks of the acrobat. They dance for three hours on a tight-rope over a red-hot fire. The emotion they arouse may be expressed as follows: Aren't they going to fall? Won't they fall in the fire? It is a hundred to one they will fall and be killed. — What chance, then, have the others, like Balzac, who are

not even equipped with these virtually futile tactics? Balzac, with lifted visor and magnificent disdain, attempted the impossible when he challenged the theatre. He encountered the absolutely impossible.

But let us return to *Vautrin*, his first blow directed at the monster.

It was in the Porte-Saint-Martin that the blow was struck. A very intelligent, but also very ill-fated, director was Balzac's ally. This extraordinary man — the director — had tried everything: classical tragedy, romantic tragedy, comedy and fantasy, educated apes and trick elephants; he had carried his directorial nerve to the point of asking a loan of thirty thousand francs in silver from Louis-Philippe. The latter, little given to lending, had replied wittily: "Monsieur Harel, I was about to make the same request of you!" This director accepted Balzac's play as a drowning man grasps at a life-line. It was a veritable ark of salvation, coming to him after not one, but a thousand floods. Harel believed himself saved! He was so eager — these details are as clear in my memory as though they had happened yesterday — he was so eager to get hold of Balzac's first play, his virgin effort, that he accepted it before it was completed. Strictly speaking, one can say that he got nothing at all. Never mind! This nothing in five acts of prose by M. Balzac was accepted with great joy.

It should be stated here, in order to explain the

preceding passage, that Balzac, by long-established habit, negotiated for the rights to his work before it was done — no matter whether it was a novel, a short story, or an article. In this way he made full use of the stimulus of necessity. And it is only fair to add that he was a fanatic in regard to keeping his word. As soon, therefore, as the contract with Harel was agreed to, he ran and imprisoned himself in the fifth floor home of Buisson, the tailor, in the old Hôtel Frascati, at the corner of the Rue de Richelieu. There, with the assistance of a patient copyist, whose business was, I believe, the editing of a small opposition newspaper, he began the composition of the famous play, *Vautrin*. His daily affairs — we might as well say his hourly affairs — hardly allowed him to stay at *Les Jardies*, where he had lived rather irregularly heretofore, and where he lived henceforth at very uneven intervals.

The road which opened before him at this juncture was the roughest, the most depressing that he had ever traveled, in spite of his experiences with the booksellers of Saint-Jacques, the editors of the Pantheon, and the discounters perched on the hill of Passy. He was obliged to create, destroy, and recreate daily, every scene, every phrase, of his play. He had to do so in order to satisfy the thousand and one demands of the actors, who were especially insistent upon having their rôles fixed to suit themselves once they realized that the play was still in

process of execution. He was dragged from one side of the stage to the other by the distressed complaints of an impatient director, who was desperately eager to make money. More than once Balzac was at the point of refusing to go on under the strain. The experience altered him terribly. Two and a half months of rehearsals rendered him almost unrecognizable. His sufferings became so well known that people would wait on the street to watch him going home after rehearsal. His great blue, square-cut coat, his large, nut-colored Cossack breeches, his white banker's waistcoat, his enormous shoes, with their tongues hanging outside the trousers instead of being tucked beneath them — all his clothes were twice too big for him, and were splattered with mud (the streets had not yet been paved) — his whole appearance proclaimed the disorder, the trouble, the inconceivable confusion into which he had been thrown by his dramatic ventures.

And what a tiring amount of conversation he had to exchange with everyone whom he met, and who wanted news of *Vautrin!* Where were the rehearsals being held? What did Frédérick Lemaître think of his part? Was Raucourt satisfied with his? Was it true that the honest Moessard, who claimed to have lived a spotless life for sixty-five years, had refused disdainfully to enact the rôle of Joseph Bonnet, the former accomplice of Vautrin and Charles Blondet in their tricks and misdeeds, the present *valet de*

chambre of the Duchess of Montsorel? Was it true that the upholsterers, the mechanics, and the painters, had quit work because their pay had not been forthcoming? — It happened that Balzac, excellent and inexhaustible paraphraser, succeeded in satisfying all these peripatetic inquisitors. He did it chiefly by repeating on every occasion the heated remarks he had heard from the lips of M. Harel, that extraordinary man who had stood face to face with misfortune and cried defiantly: "We shall see who is the stronger!" It is also true that while Balzac retailed on the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle the Voltairean eccentricities of Harel, the latter, as he leaned against a tree on the Boulevard Saint-Martin, his fingers thrust in his gold snuffbox, recited the vivid eccentricities of Balzac; whereas Jemma, an actor connected with the same theatre, as he stood outside the café of the Porte-Saint-Martin, repeated the words of Balzac, the words of Harel, and the words of Frédérick — in fact, all the wit heard in that charming and unfortunate theatre, which was never gayer, more amusing or more spirited than then. It was becoming the Gil Blas of theatres.

VII

IT WAS once during these arduous days, physically and mentally, that Balzac stopped me on the Boulevard des Capucines, and said dejectedly:

"My dear friend, I am dying of hunger. It is three o'clock; I have just come from rehearsal, and I have had nothing. Let us go eat."

"But I am not hungry, and I have not just come from a rehearsal, thank God!"

"So much the better for you. But you will come with me, won't you?"

"Well then, let's turn back to the Café de Paris."

"Not the Café de Paris; it is too late for breakfast and too early for dinner. Some other place."

"But where do you want to go?"

"Follow me. I have discovered a very good place — a wonderful pastry-shop. You will see for yourself. Are you familiar with rice-cakes?"

"This sounds rather silly."

"Wait till I tell you. Are you familiar with small macaroni pies?"

"Really . . ."

"You are not! Come on!"

"Is it very far?"

"The Rue Royale."

And clutching me with his free hand — he had three or four books under one arm — he led me at a pace quickened by hunger, to the Rue Royale, to the remarkable pastry-shop which he had discovered, and which, I presume, is still there.

We entered.

"Some of the little macaroni pies!" cried Balzac. "We will take them all."

"There you are, gentlemen," said a young English girl, as she drew an iron plate from the polished copper stove.

Balzac deposited his books on a table and prepared, as near as I could guess, to hurl himself upon the little pies with the ferocity of an ogre.

"Do you know what this book is?" he asked me.

"No, my dear Balzac."

"This," he explained, "is Cooper's latest work: *Lake Ontario*. It is beautiful! It is great! It is tremendously interesting! He owed us this masterpiece after the two or three rhapsodies he has given us recently. I want you to read this. No one but Walter Scott ever achieved such grand effects, such perfect coloring. If Cooper could only have painted humanity as skillfully as he has painted natural phenomena, he would have said the last word in art. Unfortunately . . ."

"Unfortunately, you are not eating," I interposed.

"Quite right."

Walking about the shop, laughing, and praising Cooper, he swallowed in three or four Gargantuan gulps, two macaroni pies, then two more — to the great stupefaction of the English girl, who evidently was astonished at the greed of a man who she supposed lived upon flowers, air, and perfume. Her astonishment did not seem particularly affected, either.

"Since this sort of novel pleases you so much," said I, offering Balzac a glass of water — I knew he did not want wine — "why shouldn't you write something in which the action takes place on the shore of a lake, as it does in Cooper's latest work?"

"And where the devil do you expect me to find the lake? We have nothing but cisterns and ponds. The Lake of Enghien, I suppose!"

"But you know lots of travelers; get them to talking when they visit you at *Les Jardies*. Many of them, I know, are only stalks of sugar-cane, long, tufted and stringy; but if one presses them long enough one can extract sugar and rum from them."

"Oh, my dear friend," replied Balzac, as he lifted the glass of water to his lips, "*if you only realized how many of them know nothing!* Do you need proof of this terrible fact? Then here it is. . . ."

And devouring two more macaroni pies, he went on as follows:

"When I was planning to write *Le Lis dans la Vallée*, I fully intended to include, after the manner of Cooper, some magnificent descriptions of nature. Following this idea, I plunged into nature pantheism, like a pagan. In turn I became tree, spring, horizon, star, fountain, light. And as science is a great help in any emergency, I sought out the names and the importance of a multitude of plants with which I expected to strew my descriptions. The first thing I did was to try to discover the names of the little weeds which we trample in the fields, which grow along the edges of roads, in meadows, in fact everywhere. I inquired of my gardener.

'Ah, Monsieur,' he said, 'nothing could be easier.'

'Well then, since it is so easy, tell me.'

'That is lucerne-grass; this is clover; that is sainfoin; this is . . .'

"I interrupted him: 'No, no, no! I asked you the names of these thousands of little weeds that we trample on, that we pull up. Now!'

'Indeed, Monsieur, they are weeds.'

'But the names of these myriads of weeds: long, short, upright, curved, sweet, piquant, rough, soft, wet, dry, dark, green, light green.'

'All I can say is that they are weeds.'

"I could get nothing more out of him. Only 'They are weeds.'

"The next day a friend was coming to see me: one of those very travelers whom you were just praising. I examined him on the subject in much the same manner. I said:

'You are a botanist, and you have traveled widely. Do you know anything about these little weeds that are everywhere underfoot?'

'Of course!' was his reply.

'Well then, tell me their names.' And I plucked a bunch of weeds and put them in his hand.

'The point is . . . you see,' he said after several minutes' examination, 'my knowledge is practically limited to the flora of Malabar. Now if we were in India I could tell you without hesitating the names of thousands upon thousands of little plants. Here, however . . .'

'Here you are more ignorant than I am.'

'I admit it,' confessed the traveler.

"Angry at the failure of my second attempt, I hurried next day to the Botanical Gardens. Here I spoke to one of the most learned scholars attached to the institution.

'Oh, Monsieur Balzac,' said this celebrated naturalist, 'you do not realize what you are asking me. We concern ourselves a good deal with the larch family, and with the not less interesting tamarisks; but life is too short for us to worry about all the insignificant little weeds. That is the business of a

salad-merchant. But seriously speaking, where is the action of your story laid?'

'In Touraine.'

'Well then, the first rustic you meet in Touraine will be able to tell you more of what you want to know than any professor here.'

"So I left for Touraine, and there I found the peasants as ignorant as my friend the traveler, as ignorant as my gardener, but not a bit more ignorant than the professors at the Botanical Gardens. As a consequence, when I wrote *Le Lis dans la Vallée*, I was unable to describe accurately the greenswards which I should so like to have depicted blade by blade, in the clear and painstaking Flemish manner. And now you advise me to rely upon travelers for the local color necessary to describe a lake. We must face the facts, and not be too critical of the witty Abbé Vertot because of his remarking, '*Mon siége est fait.*' He had imagined his bishopric much better than others could have described it to him. Still, there are things one cannot imagine.

"How much do I owe you?" asked Balzac then of the girl who had served the little pies.

"Nothing, Monsieur Balzac," she replied in tones so determined that there was no possibility of argument.

Balzac looked at me. He seemed to be asking, "What shall we do about it?" But instantly he

found the proper response to this gallant gesture, for, handing the English girl Cooper's novel, he murmured:

"Mademoiselle, I shall never regret anything so much as not having been the author of this."

And he left the book in the hands of his naïve and astonished admirer.

VIII

MEANWHILE the great day of production approached. Journalists whetted their knives; the tigers of first-night performances sharpened their claws. It was whispered that in spite of the many pleasant anticipations of the evening, the censors did not altogether approve of the production. There was uneasiness regarding the introduction of *Vautrin* on the Paris stage, into the midst of a respectable atmosphere, when its mission was to reveal weaknesses of the heart and errors of conjugal love. It was even reported that certain influences from very high quarters were, for these and other reasons, being exerted against the production.

There was evidently some exaggeration in these rumors, for only a few days later the play was performed. Balzac turned the last few days to good account. Always an innovator, he put into effect a scheme which was highly characteristic of his genius, and which had never been tried before by an author — at least we may assume it had not. Foreseeing the extraordinary demand for seats which was bound to come from the multitude of readers whom he had delighted for so many years, he grasped the

opportunity to speculate in the sale of tickets, and with the permission of the director of the Porte-Saint-Martin, who was pleased at Balzac's initiative, he took personal charge of the whole business. As a result, a large sale of tickets was assured, and further, it seemed as though all the spectators were to be favorably inclined toward Balzac and the play. We shall soon see, however, that the latter supposition was false. What is true is that all the tickets were sold profitably, and resold even more profitably, with bonuses, by the first buyers. Not since the premières of Victor Hugo's plays had such public curiosity been aroused. It was an event. Although at this time political conditions were exciting, and the agitations were brewing which resulted in the terrible revolution of 1848, one heard of nothing but the forthcoming presentation of *Vautrin* — not even of banquets and foreign affairs, not even of England and Egypt. It was a magnificent and just tribute paid spontaneously to a European genius, deserved because of his ability to create such a superb diversion, unique, perhaps, in the history of art.

At last the hour struck; the irrevocable handbill announced the first performance of *Vautrin,* a prose play in five acts. After this magic title one read the names of the persons in the play, and opposite these, the names of the actors representing them. I transcribe this list here, from the very copy

of *Vautrin* which Balzac gave to his intimate friend, M. Laurent Jan, to whom he also dedicated the work.

Characters:	Actors:
Jacques Collin, known as *Vautrin*	MM. Frédérick Lemaître
The Duke of Montsorel	Jemma
The Marquis Albert, his son	Lajarriette
Raoul de Frescas	Rey
Charles Blondet, known as the *Chevalier de Saint-Charles*	Raucourt
François Cadet, coachman, known as the *Philosopher*	Potonnier
Fil-de-Soie, a cook	Frédéric
Buteux, a porter	E. Dupuis
Philippe Bolard, known as *Lafouraille*	Tournan
Joseph Bonnet, valet to the Duchess of Montsorel	Moessard
A Commissary	.....
The Duchess of Montsorel (Louise de Vaudrey)	Mmes. Frédérick Lemaître
Mlle. de Vaudrey, her aunt	Georges, the younger
The Duchess of Christoval	Cénau
Inès de Christoval, Princess of Arjos	Figeac
Félicité, maid to the Duchess of Montsorel	Kersent

After the cataclysm, when nothing was left of *Vautrin* but this strange assortment of names — some overflowing with nobility, others smelling of the gallows, it was easy to form an idea of the appalling task which Balzac had set himself when he determined to compose a comedy of elements as inimical, as far removed from each other, as the sun and earth. How was he to make these thieves, these swindlers, these marquises and marchionesses, these dukes and duchesses, breathe the same air, tread the same stage, rub elbows in the same room? Above all, how was he to link them by common interest to a single action? That was the problem he faced. Did he solve it satisfactorily? That is just the point.

We have come now, in a perfectly natural way, to the story of the first performance — so eagerly awaited — of *Vautrin*.

Making up the first-night audiences is the absorbing problem of the director; it fills his dreams; everything depends upon it. Such an audience, according to whether it is well- or ill-intentioned, can assure him of a long sequence of brilliantly successful evenings, or it can sink him outright. The intrinsic value of the play has something to do with the matter, but it is not usually the chief determining factor. The truth of this has long been recognized by theatrical directors, and is proved by the fact that even the strongest theatres, the subsidized ones such as the Opéra or the Opéra-Comique, dare not

neglect the organization of their first-night audiences. Anyone who imagines that even the most celebrated opera or the most celebrated actress is put before the public on the basis of merit alone, is in grievous error. Adjoining the box occupied by certain dukes and princesses is another box containing, you may be sure, several friends of the management, prepared to support, in terms of warm disinterestedness, the play or the artist. Yes, the box was given free; yes, the fashionable lady leaning on the rail is instructed to stir up enthusiasm; yes, the electric spark which will set things off is at the tips of her gloved fingers. On a chair, in the darkness at the rear of the box lie the wreaths supplied by the management; and those bouquets which seem merely a necessary part of the toilet, a natural ornament to those who wear them, were paid for by the theatre. In the course of the evening, at just the right moment, they will be tossed on the stage, to the exact spot chosen by the director.

Balzac imagined that he had assembled for the brilliant occasion an audience more than devoted to his success. But he did not reckon on the time that had elapsed between the selling of the tickets and the first performance. This interval was rather long, and during it the handling of the tickets got completely out of his control, developing into a frightful traffic. Manias and briberies of all sorts came into play, with the result that two-thirds of

the seats changed hands, and passed into the possession of persons who were either strangers or enemies to Balzac. The gas-light, therefore, instead of revealing a well-regulated audience of friends, revealed a blustering mob, undisciplined, bigoted, scornful, having neither the good manners of a selected group, which had been counted on, nor the sincere frankness of a normal audience which purchases its authority at the door. The effect of this motley crowd was apparent from the start. The first three acts went through without any crisis; in fact they were received rather coldly, rather languidly. One scanned the audience, one waited, one did not know what to expect or from what direction to expect it. The ill-feeling seemed hesitant; the enthusiasm did not find expression. The ill-feeling, however, was gathering force and intrenching itself.

It burst like a shell during the fourth act when the actor Frédérick reappeared on the scene in the strange costume of the Mexican general, Crustamente, with a golden sash, a hat decorated with a bird of paradise, and a transatlantic accent. Murmurs drowned the voices of the actors; the actors faltered. The situation was critical. Disaster threatened; it descended outright when certain persons took it upon themselves to point out the ludicrous resemblance between the head-dress of Frédérick and that of King Louis-Philippe, whose eldest son was sitting in a proscenium box. Such an unfortu-

THE ARREST OF VAUTRIN

nate complication! The political serpent and the literary serpent intertwined — their double hisses accompanying the play, condemned to failure from that moment, in spite of the sometimes successful and always admirable efforts of the principal actor to save it.

The audience was no longer dignified or calm, respectful or considerate. Each box was the mouth of a great volcano, of which the pit was the crater: a volcano of mockeries, of sneers, of blasphemy, of slander, but also of defensive threats, for there were, here and there, a few warm friends, who remained loyal in the midst of all this unprecedented fury, this unbridled animosity.

The battle was definitely lost. To form an adequate notion of how disastrous the defeat was, one must read the newspapers which came around on Monday to collect the dead: to wit, a name great among the greatest, a daring play filled with magnificent faults, a ruined theatre, a director robbed of his last hope, an entire company of artists reduced to nothing. Of these newspapers let us quote one whose standing, practically official, gave its judgments then, as now, particular authority, and which was distinguished from all the others because of the literary fame attached to its editor:

"Yesterday evening we attended, from seven o'clock until midnight, a lamentable spectacle, and even this morning we have scarcely recovered from

the profound suffering which one finds inevitable in the presence of such indescribable works, so utterly lacking in wit, style, grammar, polish, originality, and commonsense. Could we believe our senses? Could we trust our eyes and ears? Was M. de Balzac really the author of this miserable piece of barbarism and ineptitude? Alas! You cannot imagine how painful it is to be an eye-witness to the swift degradation of a man who for eight years has been our most brilliant writer.

"Where can one commence? I am incompetent to say anything on the subject. The best judge of such a work is undoubtedly the chief of police, M. Allard. He alone can tell you what is true and what is false in this drama. Aside from this, one can only give a synopsis, in which everything is softened, the rags concealed, the purulent wounds hidden, the leprous spots rigidly suppressed, and the heaped-up crimes kept in the background. Even then the synopsis must recount so many pollutions of the mind and senses that one would be bound to consider it overdone, malicious, and false.

"As for criticism, what can it accomplish — lost, bewildered, frightened, amid this pandemonium of all the wicked passions? What can it cling to, except vices, crimes, meaningless words, tortured emotions? In brief, what can one do? How can we lift to our lips this tavern-glass filled to the brim with drugged and heavy wine?"

After this preliminary appreciation of the play, the editor went on with his synopsis, pausing now and then to appraise the author's talent.

"Act Two. We find ourselves immediately in a most wonderful world, a world which M. de Balzac has discovered. He is himself its creator, its architect, its weaver, its purveyor of styles, its language instructor, its chamber-maid, its perfumer, its hairdresser, its piano-teacher, and its money-lender. He has made this world all that it is. It is he who sleeps on the sofas placed expressly for sleep and for adultery; it is he who burdens all his women with the same unhappiness. It is he who buys on credit, horses, jewelry, and clothes for his weak-chested, penniless, and heartless fops. He is the first to discover this livid veneer, this pallor of good breeding which distinguishes all his heroes. He has figured out in his fertile head all these attractive crimes, all this masked perfidy, all these ingenious violations of mind and body which are the ordinary incidents of his plot. The jargon which this unique world employs, and which only it can understand, is nevertheless a mother-tongue discovered by M. de Balzac. Which partially accounts for the ephemeral success of this novelist, who still reigns supreme in London and in St. Petersburg, as the most faithful chronicler of the manners and events of the present century. . . .

"Loud voices demanded the name of the author.

We listened carefully, hoping till the last that rumor had lied, and that we were dealing merely with some minor Corneille of the boulevards, inspired by Frédérick Lemaître. Alas! Alas! what we had been told was only too true. The good M. Moessard, an absolutely honest man, assured us it was M. de Balzac. It is a regrettable chapter to add to the story of human blunders."[1]

The day after the memorable production, that is, on Sunday, the 15th of March, 1840, at about noon I went out to *Les Jardies* to see Balzac. He had gone there to escape the inevitable hubbub. It is easy to understand, too, that he was anxious to get back to his lawns, his flowers, and his trees; to breathe deeply once more the pure air of which he had so long been deprived. I found him very calm, but noticed that his face was flushed, that his hands were hot, and that his speech, though composed, fell sadly from lips that appeared swollen, as after a feverish night.

"My dear friend," he greeted me before I had time to refer to the events of the previous evening, "I want you to notice that strip of land at the lower end of *Les Jardies;* it adjoins my property. Do you see it?"

"Certainly."

"I am planning to establish down there, in a few days, a mammoth dairy, to furnish the highest grade

[1] *Journal des Débats.* March 16, 1840.

of milk to the nearby countrysides. I know they need it, for they lie between Paris and Versailles, two great sponges which suck up everything. I shall keep Rambouillet cows, which are, as you know, the most famous milch-cows in the world. After all expenses are paid, I shall be sure of a clear profit amounting to three thousand francs a year. Well! what do you think of it?"

My mind still busy with the events of the day before, I paid little attention to what he was saying, and consequently did not know how to reply. He continued:

"On this side of the strip of land you will notice another beautiful square plot . . . ?"

"Which has nothing on it at all."

"At present, yes . . . but wait. Under the direction of Louis XIV, the celebrated gardener Quintinie planted, in a field set aside for that special purpose, apart from the main gardens of Versailles, a rare and excellent species of vegetable, which was supplied only to the King's table. Louis XIV wished this cultivation to continue after him, for the benefit of his successors. The wish was granted. Louis XV and Louis XVI both ate of the favored vegetable. The Revolution greatly upset the royal kitchen-gardens, but under the Restoration they came back somewhat into favor. Lately Louis-Philippe has fully reinstated the tradition; the court once more enjoys the vegetables of Quintinie. But I am in a

position to extend this pleasure to the upper classes, to the gentlemen of neighboring estates, for I have the necessary seeds, and I am going to plant them! It will mean another three thousand francs in profits! Do you understand? "

"That makes six thousand francs," I replied. "Three thousand from milk, and three thousand from vegetables."

"Nor is that all!"

"Pray go on."

"Look once more . . . there . . . to our left. On that piece of ground which has as marvellous an exposure as though it were in Malaga, I am going to have a vineyard — just like those of the South."

"Where the wine is detestable."

"Because they do not know how to cultivate their vines. I can tell you all about Malaga. This bit of land I am showing you is a veritable piece of sunlight; it is warm, dry, ferruginous; it is wine, and wine at three thousand francs a cask. Without exaggerating in the least, I am sure of making twelve thousand francs a year profit. Twelve thousand francs!"

"Besides three thousand from milk, and three thousand from vegetables. That makes, if I am not mistaken, eighteen thousand in all."

"That is correct. But let me finish. Look now in another direction. Observe the height of that magnificent walnut-tree."

"And that magnificent walnut-tree belongs to the township of Sèvres, or of Ville d'Avray," I replied. "You have told me so a hundred times."

"I have bought it! It is mine!"

"What! But great God! What will you do with it?"

"I will make it bring me an income of two thousand francs."

"Two thousand francs from walnuts!"

"Not from walnuts."

"From what, then . . . ?"

"I will tell you in a few days. But this is what they have driven me to, by prohibiting further performances of *Vautrin*. To an income of twenty thousand francs!"

"*Vautrin* has been prohibited?"

"Read this."

Balzac then showed me the official letter he had just received. M. de Rémusat, through M. Cavé, of the department of fine arts, and without an explanation of any kind, forbade further performances of Balzac's play. And Balzac, as fecund in consolations for himself as in works of art for others, had already assured himself of an income of twenty thousand francs from cows, vegetables, grapes, and a single walnut-tree.

IX

ONE day in June, 1840, I received a note from Balzac, who was at *Les Jardies*, begging me to meet him the next day at three o'clock on the Champs-Élysées, between the Chevaux de Marly and the Café des Ambassadeurs. He was particularly anxious that I should not fail him, he added, for he wanted to ask a very important favor of me. As he always came on a similar mission, I racked my brain trying to figure out what he wanted, so I might be prepared for the difficulties which would inevitably stand in the way of my desire to oblige him.

But I could not imagine what was in his mind, and therefore remained until the next day in the grip of curiosity. The weather, for that time of year, was atrocious; although the best season in Paris is always atrocious. At three o'clock, as I came into the Champs-Élysées, a grey autumn wind, flecked with rain, was driving the leaves to earth; the sun was weak; it was cold enough for February or March; no one was on the streets; few carriages were abroad. But there was I, walking from the

Chevaux de Marly to the Café des Ambassadeurs, looking carefully for Balzac.

My patience was not put to a severe test, for only a few minutes after three o'clock had been sounded in the Tuileries, I saw Balzac coming through the gate of the Place de l'Étoile, walking with that heavy yet rapid step, so characteristic of his elephantine carriage. Before he reached me he began explaining, most fluently, that he had come from Madame de Girardin's, where he had almost frozen to death. As a matter of fact he was as green as a drowned person, and he shook in every limb.

"How is it possible," he asked me, "how is it possible that a superior woman, a woman of brilliance and good sense, like Madame de Girardin, can bring herself to live in the most impossible of lodgings, in a climate like ours; to live in a temple which has no god — that is, no protection from rheumatism and inflammations; a temple with a portico, Ionian columns, mosaic pavement, marble facings, walls of polished stucco, cornices of alabaster, and other Greek embellishments, at forty-eight degrees and fifty minutes latitude north! And then, with the excuse that we are in the month of June, to have no fire on the hearth! Still, the whole forest of Dodone, cut down in three strokes, would not prove sufficient to warm such a monument. I give you my word of honor, she might as well have entertained her friends on a frozen lake in Switzer-

land. Well, when Madame de Girardin saw me rising to go, and said, 'You are leaving us so soon, Balzac?' I felt like replying instantly, 'Yes, Madame, I am going out into the street to get warm.' But enough of that. I have come to have a talk with you. Let us walk fast and improve our circulation, while you listen to me. I have just written for the first number of the *Revue Parisienne* a little story which pleases me, and which I will read to you one of these days, when I have found . . . something that I have not found yet, but which we are going to find together. I should, however, begin by telling you who the principal character is, or, to be more exact, who the unique character is, in this little study of morals — the woeful morals of our time which have resulted from the political conditions of the last ten years."

Balzac sketched, then, in great sculptural lines, the figure of this character — a figure too powerful, in my estimation, for the machine-made frame of the short story, but one destined, surely, in Balzac's own mind, to be transferred later to the less-restricted medium of the novel. He went on to depict, in the most intimate details, the life of this character he had created. It was the restless life of a man of genius — exploited by those who know nothing but ambition and intrigue — a man who, each time he had succeeded in establishing one of these others in a palace, returned to languish in

misery and hunger on the floor of his own garret, where, after much suffering, he died, more a victim of deception than of privation.

"Now this is where I need your help," continued Balzac. "Such an extraordinary man must have a name appropriate to his destiny; a name which explains him, sorts him out, announces him as clearly as a cannon announces itself from afar: 'My name is cannon!' It must be a name which is molded on him, and which can be fitted to the mask of no one else. Well, this name will not come to me. I have tried every possible combination of vocal sounds, but without success. There are so many stupid names! — Not that I am afraid of christening him with a stupid name; what I fear — or, rather, dread — is giving him a name which does not fit him as perfectly as the gum fits the tooth; or the nail, the flesh. Do you understand me?"

"I understand, but I do not agree. . . ."

"What! you do not agree . . . !"

"No."

"You do not agree that there are names which bring to mind a diadem, a sword, a helmet, a flower . . . ?"

"No."

"Which reveal a great poet, a satirical wit, a profound philosopher, a celebrated painter?"

"No, no! I should sooner believe the exact opposite. Racine, for example!". . .

"Yes, Racine! I was going to mention him. That name; does it not portray a poet, tender, passionate, harmonious?"

"I assure you that all it conveys to me is the thought of a botanist or a pharmacist — certainly not of a tender, pathetic poet."

"But Corneille? Corneille?"

"Corneille gives rise within me to the idea of a rather insignificant bird."

"But Boileau? That name — Boileau?"

"Suggests a pun — if you allow a slight change in spelling."

"The great Pascal?"

"A name borne by three thousand porters in Marais. All these names, I tell you, seem brilliant, great, sublime, to you simply because they have belonged to men of intellectual worth."

"I do not believe it," declared Balzac, terribly annoyed, and exhibiting his usual stubbornness. "We are named on high, before we ever appear on earth. It is a mystery which cannot be explained by applying the logic of our little minds. What is more, I am not the only one who believes that this remarkable correspondence between name and character serves as a talisman — infernal or divine — either to light a man's way through life or to destroy him. Serious thinkers have accepted this belief, and, strangely enough, in this one matter the crowd

agrees with the thinkers. Which means, really, that everyone believes in it."

"Except me. But we will not spend any more time on my personal scruples. What you want is for us to find a significant name, a name which will classify and explain this character whom you have created, a name which corresponds . . ."

"Which corresponds to everything about him: his face, his stature, his voice, his past, his future, his genius, his tastes, his passions, his misfortunes, and his glory. Do you know one?"

"No."

"Well, I am exhausted from six months' effort to find it. I have already put in circulation more names than there are in the Royal Directory, and I feel absolutely incapable of discovering this one."

"Let's invent it between us."

"Impossible! I have already tried, haven't I? Besides, I have come to the conclusion, after a thousand futile attempts, that one can no more manufacture a name than one can manufacture granite, coal, or marble. A name is the work of time, of revolutions, of I do not know what. It makes itself. It is no more invented than a language is. Tell me, if you can, who has ever invented a language?"

"If what you say is true, then all we can do is discover the name."

"That is all."

"Provided it exists."

"It does exist," affirmed Balzac solemnly.

"The question is then, where shall we find it?"

"That is just why I have asked you to help me."

After a few moments of thought I inquired of Balzac: "Do you wish to employ the method I so often rely on when I find myself embarrassed by the same situation — though of course I do not profess as sincerely as you, the religion of names?"

"What is your method?"

"I read sign-boards."

"You read sign-boards?"

"Yes, for on sign-boards one can read the most pompous and ridiculous names, standing for the most bizarre, and from the point of view of your system, the most contrary things. Some are fairly bursting with evil instincts, others breathe the sweet perfume of honesty and virtue; some captivate the hearts of vaudeville writers, who give them to their comic characters; others are transported from the wooden panel of the sign-board to the stage of the Gaieté and the Ambigu, where they become the names of villains. In reality they are the names of merchants, candle-makers, and confectioners."

"But," said Balzac, "it would be possible to read two or three thousand sign-boards before finding the name one wanted. . . ."

"Yes, and then not find it. — But shall we try?"

"Let's try!"

The idea fascinated Balzac. I had not realized what I might be let in for.

"Let's try," repeated Balzac. "Where shall we begin?"

"We'll begin right where we are — here," I replied.

At that moment we were leaving the Court of the Louvre, and entering the Rue du Coq-Saint-Honoré, which was not then the large, imposing street it is today, but was twice as long, and was enveloped from head to foot in sign-boards, as completely as an Egyptian mummy is swathed in bandages.

"This is the place to begin," said Balzac.

We should have realized the uselessness of this first move. There were plenty of names, but names without interest, without any of the qualities which Balzac needed for his character. He surveyed one side, I the other: our noses in the air, our feet going in any direction, and frequently colliding with passers-by, who thought we were blindmen.

After leaving the Rue du Coq, what other streets did we not traverse! And always with as little success. Along the Rue St. Honoré to the Palais-Royal, then along all those in the neighborhood of the Jardin: the Rue Vivienne, the Place de la Bourse, the Rue Neuve-Vivienne, the Boulevard Montmartre.

At the corner of the Rue Montmartre, worn-out,

sick of so much reading, and discouraged by Balzac's persistent rejection of every name I recommended to him, I refused to go farther. I revolted.

"It always happens," said Balzac sadly, his eyes fixed on another series of unexplored sign-boards. "Christopher Columbus is always deserted by his followers. Onward! I alone will reach the shores of America. Onward!"

"But you are surrounded by Americas. You refuse to go ashore on one of them. You have rejected every name. It is not fair of you. Here are some superb names: belonging to German old-clothes dealers, Hungarian bootmakers, Westphalian shoemakers, and a thousand others: all of them highly expressive. You reject everything. You expect the impossible. Your America will never have its Christopher Columbus."

"Laziness is as unjustifiable as anger, in my estimation," was Balzac's reply. "Try leaning on my arm, and bear up as far as Saint-Eustache. This will be the three days granted Columbus by his followers."

"But not a step farther than Saint-Eustache!"

"Very well."

We resumed our search.

As I should have foreseen, Saint-Eustache was no more than Balzac's excuse to get me to survey, to their full length and height, the Rues du Mail, de Cléry, du Cadran, des Fossés-Montmartre, and the

Place des Victoires — the latter a hot-bed of magnificent Alsatian names, tasting of the Rhine.

In the midst of this museum of names I swore to Balzac that if he did not immediately choose one, I would leave him.

"Only the Rue du Bouloi!" he pleaded, taking me by the hand. "Do not refuse me the Rue du Bouloi! Something tells me that we will eventually find . . ."

"Very well. I grant you the Rue du Bouloi!"

"Saved!" cried Balzac. "After we have done the Rue du Bouloi we will return to *Les Jardies* and dine."

The Rue du Bouloi, following the example of many other streets, possesses three names: a habit of superfluity which makes Paris topographically so difficult for strangers. At first it is called the Rue du Bouloi, then it becomes the Rue Coq-Heron, and finally the Rue de la Jussienne. It was in the last section of this street that Balzac — I shall never forget it as long as I live — after lifting his gaze above a little door, a scarcely perceptible, narrow, oblong door, which opened onto a dark and humid alley, suddenly changed color, experienced a thrill of excitement which passed through his arm to mine, uttered a cry, and exclaimed:

"There! there! there! Read! read! read!"

His voice shook with emotion.

I read: MARCAS.

"Marcas! Well, what do you think of it? Marcas! What a name! Marcas!"

"I do not see that that name . . ."

"Listen! Marcas!"

"But . . ."

"Be quiet, I say! It is the name of names! We need look for no other. Marcas!"

"I am sure I ask nothing better!"

"Let us proudly accept it: Marcas! My hero shall be named Marcas. In Marcas there is the philosopher, the writer, the great politician, the unrecognized poet. They are all in it: Marcas!"

"Indeed I hope so."

"You needn't doubt it for a moment."

"But if the name Marcas indicates all that you claim it does, then the owner of this door should really possess some superiority. Let us find out who he is, for there is nothing on the sign to indicate his profession."

"His profession will have to do with one of the arts, and a distinguished art, too. You may be sure of that."

I shook my head, but Balzac, ignoring my scepticism, continued:

"Marcas, who calls himself Z. Marcas, thus adding to his name a flame, an aigrette, a star — Z. Marcas, is certainly a great artist: an engraver, a sculptor, or a goldsmith like Benvenuto Cellini."

"Isn't that going a bit far?"

"With such a name one could not go too far."

"We shall soon know about that. I shall find the *concierge* and ask him about the profession of Monsieur Z. Marcas."

"Yes; go ahead."

I could not find the *concierge* in that house, so I left Balzac in a state of adoration, and eventually managed to find the one next door. I asked him about M. Marcas, and learned what I wanted to know.

"Tailor!" I shouted to Balzac.

"Tailor!"

Balzac bowed his head . . . but a moment afterwards lifted it proudly again.

"He deserves something better," he cried. "Never mind, I shall immortalize the name. That is my mission!"

The immortal tailor is still living. He is still tailoring in the neighborhood of the Bank — still under the name of Marcas, too, which anyone may read above his pretty little shop.

That very evening at *Les Jardies*, where we dined with the appetite of gentlemen who have read three or four thousand sign-boards, Balzac wrote for the *Revue Parisienne*, as a foreword to his story entitled *Z. Marcas*, a monograph on that now historic name.

I quote from this curious monograph:

"There is a certain harmony which exists be-

tween a character and his name. This Z which precedes Marcas, which appears in the address on his letters, and which he never omits from his signatures — this final letter of the alphabet suggests to the mind heaven only knows what fatality.

"Marcas! Repeat to yourself this name of only two syllables. Do you not find in it a sinister significance? Does it not seem to you that the man who bears it is destined to martyrdom? In spite of its strangeness and barbarity, however, this name deserves immortality. It is well composed, easily pronounced, and short enough to suit a celebrity. Is it not as harmonious as it is odd? But does it not also seem incomplete? I do not care to go so far as to maintain that names exert any influence upon destiny, but between the events of life and the names of men there is surely a secret and inexplicable harmony, or else a perceptible lack of harmony. Often the correlation is slight, but it is still efficacious. The world we live in is rich; it contains everything. Perhaps some day we shall discover the occult sciences.

"Do you not perceive in Z a thwarted nature? Does not the uncertain and fantastic zig-zag symbolize a tormented life? What has breathed upon this letter which, in each language wherein it is employed, governs scarcely fifty words? Marcas was named Zephirin. Saint Zepherin is held in great reverence in Brittany. Marcas was a Breton.

"Examine this name once more, Z. Marcas! The entire life of a man is compressed in the strange combination of those seven letters. Seven! The most significant of cabalistic numbers. The man died at the age of thirty-five. His life was thus composed of seven lusters. Marcas! Does it not give you the sense of something precious being dashed to pieces by a catastrophe — either loudly or in silence?"[1]

Balzac, having read to himself this introduction to his story, said to me, with more composure than he had shown in the Rue de la Jussienne:

"I shall always regret that this name was borne by a tailor; not, certainly, because I discredit the profession of tailoring, but because the word tailor brings to my mind certain debts, certain objectionable bills. I foresee that more than once I am going to be distracted in reading my work to you. Later on it will not matter. Z. Marcas will remain — will persist in spite of everything."

[1] *Revue Parisienne*, July 25, 1840.

X

WE HAVE uttered that terrible word: *debts*. The debts of Balzac! We must not disappoint those who like nothing better than to see a delicate subject, a matter of the greatest privacy, passed from hand to hand, until it becomes common property and is dragged in the dust. But we must bear in mind the serious danger which threatens the reputation of a celebrity who was so little favored by fortune at the beginning of his literary career, and who, though visited by her after long years of labor, experienced, in the interval, discouragements, attacks, buffets, storms, and sometimes wrecks. But when have the caprices of fate not been humiliating? Has not the road traveled by great men been always a stony one, filled with ruts? Corneille, Bayle, Erasmus, Diderot — to mention only four out of a thousand — were they not obliged sometimes to measure the rancid oil in their lamps, and to suffer with bitter smiles their ejection into the street? Which is to blame — fate or the man of genius? Which suffers? Which is reproached by contemporaries and hated by posterity? Fate, and fate alone! Let fate argue her case before the jury of public opinion.

These famous debts of Balzac, with which we are so concerned, which accompanied every step of his career, like followers in a procession; at which we smile secretly as we admire the marvelous creations of his brain; by means of which he kept in the public eye, at home and abroad; which he discussed with everyone, from the highest aristocrat to his gardener at *Les Jardies*, and always in the most amusing and irresistible manner — these debts, which threatened for a time to become as celebrated as his writings; these astonishing debts, did they, we may ask, ever really exist? Ludicrous and profound mystery! Let us lean over the edge of this dark pit and see what is hidden there? What will come forth — the truth or a great burst of laughter?

In my opinion, Balzac took care to let it be believed that he had debts, many debts, an enormous number of debts. His pride, legitimate and reasonable, compelled him to encourage as much as possible this harmless misconception — a misconception which was exaggerated and spread as much by his friends as by his enemies. Balzac, it must be regretfully admitted, did not earn with his pen the fantastic sums with which he has been gilded like a pagoda at Benares. He was very prolific, of course, but it is only fair to explain here why it was that the whole mass of his work brought so little monetary return.

To begin with, it should be made clear that the earnings of his final creative years were out of all proportion to those of the years which immediately preceded them, and that these years, in turn, were much more lucrative than the first few had been. Which means that we must strike an average. Furthermore, it is important to realize that he did not profit equally from his writing for magazines and his writing for newspapers. The remunerations were quite different. His work on magazines, however much honor it brought him, brought little else, for the simple reason that the magazines themselves were limited to so few pages. His work for newspapers paid much better. But, according to an agreement, he was required to pay the cost of proof-corrections on his own work — Babylonian corrections! Cyclopean costs! — The sum due him, no matter how large, found itself, when everything was deducted, singularly thin and insubstantial. These two sources of revenue, therefore, even when united, did not form a very large stream. There remained the sale of articles, stories, and novels, and the reprints of newspaper material in book-form. But these, too, were financially a mirage. When the papers spoke of Balzac's having been paid thirty thousand francs by his editors, the fact was he had received three thousand. All these inflations, these dropsical superimpositions, created a decidedly false impression. The real total contradicted, day by

day, year by year, the literary budget ascribed to the famous writer. Taking everything into account, except two or three bits of luck — did he have as many as three? — Balzac never averaged more than ten or twelve thousand francs a year, even during his most prosperous years.

This should clarify the matter and end all discussion.

But Balzac, as a popular writer, wished to keep pace — childish vanity! — with M. Alexandre Dumas and M. de Lamartine, and he could not, without swallowing his pride, allow it to be thought that he did not make an appalling income like the others. And in what other way, besides those we have mentioned, could he have created the impression that he was rich, and that he, like his rivals, had the philosopher's stone at the bottom of his inkwell? It was reported, of course, that one night at a masked ball at the Opéra a rich lady slipped a roll of bank-notes into his hand and then disappeared among the friezes. But who had ever seen this white lady and her magical money?

No! Balzac loved and fondly played with the illusion of this fortune which his books should have brought him, but which really he did not have at all. It was an extravagant falsehood; it made him a pseudo-millionaire. What little wealth he did acquire he acquired late; but his imagination was always richer than his coffer — he drew from it, and

it never was exhausted. Unable to make a show with horses, carriages, and luxurious houses, he made it by the ancient method of comedy, which, incidentally, he had perfected admirably: that is, by means of his debts — those huge, proverbial debts, whose existence we have good reason to doubt.

A long time before, Balzac, who was caution and economy personified, had been involved in an unfortunate commercial venture from which he had extricated himself with his customary honesty, and he was forever speaking of this affair, which was familiarly referred to at *Les Jardies* as the 'Kessner loss.'

"If we could only make good that Kessner loss!" I would say the moment he opened his mouth to recount the story of the printing establishment he had founded shortly after his arrival in Paris. It had been his everlasting ruin, he insisted.

Meanwhile, in order that these debts of which he complained should not appear utterly mythical, he found it necessary to allow a few actually to accumulate; but these were so trivial, so ridiculous, that they served no purpose. One day, being even more sceptical than usual regarding these fictitious debts, I said to him:

"Now see here, Balzac! You are a millionaire. All Paris says you are worth a million, a million that you have tucked away."

"I am worth a million, eh!" he cried, sweeping

me with his flaming eyes. " Ah! I have tucked away a million! Well, yes, I have. . . ." Then he added, " In a butter-jar."

I can see now his crooked finger pointing at the mouth of a butter-jar, in which he declared he had concealed his million.

It is apparent that these debts, when examined closely, and contrary to the ordinary laws of perspective, are more vague than when seen from a distance. When we try putting them in a clear light, they fade completely out of the picture, and thus allow us no end of freedom in discussing them. At this point I should like to remark that the silly habit of wishing that a great man could have been free from debt is one of those notions with which I find it very difficult to agree. That one has a natural prejudice against the vice of debts, and that one skips rather lightly over such spiritual weaknesses when they have been indulged in to excess, I am willing to admit — we must not be too quick to reproach Racine for having been fond of the Champmesle, or Mirabeau for having spent so many nights in gambling — but to whisper so cautiously in the ear of history the debts of an illustrious man, for fear of bringing a blush to the cheek of that solvent muse — nonsense! After all, when this man paid his debts, history could do no more than give him his receipt.

Let us come back now to these debts of Balzac,

around which we have traced so many circles. They were so diverse, and at the same time so numerous, that eventually they broke the peace in which Balzac hoped to work at *Les Jardies*. The gate bell seemed always to be ringing. The word 'gate' is here used loosely, for the entrance to *Les Jardies* was a solid door, as solid, indeed, as the one that belonged to good old Grandet, at Saumur. This bell, which may possibly have been of silver, and which I can hear now sending its sharp vibrations out over the tree-tops, was kept perfectly toned by the gardener — at Balzac's command. The reason for this was that Balzac thought nothing in the world would discourage a creditor — if he is capable of being discouraged — more than not finding someone with whom to speak: someone on whom to vent his anger, in case he feels violent; or someone at whom to fire his epigrams, in case he feels acrimonious. Balzac's idea was to have *Les Jardies* give the impression of being inhabited by persons who had just gone to Paris, to Versailles, or to an adjoining village.

The plan was ingenious, but it was not easily put into effect in such an accessible establishment, comprising two large dwellings, and several out-buildings, occupied by the gardener, his wife and children, and visited daily by sight-seers and by friends.

Besides the dog! I had nearly forgotten him. A large dog, who had his kennel at the entrance, and

was querulous, snappish, and — well, in fact, a country dog — the sort of dog one stupidly calls Turk. This one was called Turk. You may guess whether or not he barked!

But how, following Balzac's plan, was it possible to deceive the creditor who comes softly, rings the bell slyly, and then presses his sensitive ear to the door to learn whether or not he has made himself heard? How was it possible to smother instantly all sound, all activity — to convince the creditor that he had made a mistake, that he had taken a tomb for a house? Well, Balzac managed it. Long practice had rendered him an expert at this business. His method almost always succeeded.

This is what would happen at *Les Jardies*. First of all, we knew that if the creditor did not put in an appearance within five or six minutes from the time the Paris train passed, he would not arrive at all. We could then wait in safety and peace until time for the next train. As soon as we heard the roar of the approaching monster, the whole establishment quickened its vigilance: in the orchard, the field, the kitchen-garden, the cry was, "On your guard!"

The bell would ring! "Sh! It must be a creditor! . . . It is!" Each person walking in the grounds would halt beside the nearest tree, and would there remain utterly immobile; he would become a tree-trunk himself. We were Daphnes pur-

sued by Apollo. Very pretty! The gardener remained bent over his spade, not even stirring. The dog, on the verge of barking, was pulled up sharply by the cord fastened to his collar, and thereupon renounced the idea of barking. He would grumble, but would be silenced by the hypnotic and imperious glance of the gardener's wife or son. Behind the green window-blinds, Balzac and his guests, quivering with fear and joy, would listen to the imprecations of the creditor outside the walls — magnificent blasphemies which invariably ended with the words: "Is everybody dead in there!"

Great heavens, yes! They must all be dead! And after coming so far, too! A wild-goose chase!

Then the creditor would depart. We would hear the gravel of the road crunch under his sacred feet. We would watch him studying the vegetation of the locality until time for the Versailles-Paris train. Then the fiery train would come and go. What followed was a resurrection. Blinds were flung open to the sun; pedestrians resumed their natural shape and continued their reveries; the gardener once more tended his plants; the dog barked joyously at the hens in the backyard; everyone was happy, carefree, and at peace until another ring at the doorbell. Then the same scene would be re-enacted — the same crisis would be endured.

XI

BEFORE we leave this discussion of debts, we must mention, as one of the oddities which made Balzac's life at *Les Jardies* so memorable, the story of his relationship with one of his neighbors — a very patient neighbor, but no less peculiar than patient when it came to matters of credit. As we have already said, Balzac, with an innocence which completely overshadowed any slight trickery involved in his borrowing, had made so bold as to accumulate certain debts. He had acquired them, and too late regretted his rashness. For he found himself being gradually hemmed in by them until at last he could scarcely move from one spot. These unfortunate and extremely awkward obligations kept him from moving far beyond the confines of his own house. He, to whom exercise and freedom were so necessary, was actually unable to go abroad in daylight without encountering one of his local creditors: a groceryman, a milkman, a butcher, or a baker, from Ville-d'Avray. These debts were, of course, a terrible mistake. It is no doubt a bore to be indebted to God and the devil, but to owe one's neighbors is an intolerable situation: it closes the

roads, cuts off the view, chains one's feet, and deprives one of the air itself.

One can easily imagine the lamentable effect of these suffocating debts.

Arriving at *Les Jardies* very early one morning — it was about five o'clock — I found Balzac walking round and round his rustic cottage, keeping closely to the strip of dry asphalt which he had laid along this circuit.

"Well, what are you doing here?" I inquired.

"You can see; I am walking."

"But so early in the morning!"

"So late, you mean."

"Late? But it is barely five o'clock."

"So late, I tell you! What do you want, anyway? I am sleepy. I should have gotten up earlier than this if I expected to have my walk in the wood."

"What keeps you from having it now, instead of walking round and round the house like a horse in a tread-mill?"

"No! no! it is impossible!"

"Why?"

"Because of the warden."

"The warden?"

"Yes, the warden. He will already be at work."

"But how can the warden prevent your taking a walk? You are not going hunting, nor are you likely to indulge in disorderly conduct. What has the warden to do with you?"

"I am certainly not going hunting. . . . But see here," said Balzac, wishing to change the subject, "come in and let me read you my article for the *Revue Parisienne*. I think you will like it."

"No; let's hear it later. Why don't we go now and enjoy the morning air in the wood of Ville-d'Avray?"

"Oh, no! . . . Too late! too late! The warden . . ."

"So we're back to that again!"

"Ah, he is a terrible man! Not, you understand, that he persecutes me, that he hunts me down as the others do. No, no! But his silence, his searching glance, his postures, his words which seem shot from a gun — they worry me; they freeze me; they petrify me. It is like meeting a ghost."

Balzac must have overworked last night, I thought, and is now suffering from an hallucination. It will be best to pretend not to have understood him, and to ignore the subject.

I took him by the arm and tried to hurry him.

"Come now! Do this for my sake if not for your own," I begged him. "Let's go and walk a few hours in the wood. Why not take our canes and walk about halfway to Versailles? Believe me, our appetites will be greatly improved."

Balzac was hesitant. "You really want to?" he asked.

"Please!"

Giving in reluctantly, he sighed and dragged his feet to the gate, where he took from a corner two huge iron-tipped staffs — I shall recount later our experience with these staffs, which I believe he had brought back with him from Switzerland — presented one to me, and together we set out along the edge of the wood of Ville-d'Avray.

Balzac's extraordinary apprehensiveness was apparent in his insistence that I lead the way into the woods, but he had grown quite calm by the time we had left behind us a hundred yards of tall ash-trees and lime-trees, which were still cloaked in the heavy mist of night.

We were talking, I remember, of the hopes — exaggerated, as usual — he had for the success of the *Revue Parisienne*, a rather questionable periodical, on which he was determined to get me in the capacity of director, when Balzac stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence, and stammered:

"Here he is!"

"What?"

"It is he!"

"But who?"

"The warden!"

"Is this a fixed idea of yours?"

"It is less fixed than he is," Balzac replied, pointing out to me at the end of a lane along which we

were walking, the silhouette of a warden — an unmistakeable type, with his three-cornered hat askew, his gun hanging over his left arm, his loose shoulder-belt, his rustic gaiters, his grey hair, and his pipe welded to the corner of his mouth. It is true we could not, from the distance, perceive all these picturesque details, but there was no doubt about the rural, official character of the man: he was a warden — only too obviously so.

Balzac had turned pale.

Meanwhile we were continuing straight along the lane, and the caretaker was coming steadily nearer.

"What did I tell you?" murmured Balzac.

"You mean this man . . . the one you were afraid . . . ?"

"I knew we would meet him, no matter how careful we were. You didn't believe me . . ."

"But why should you be so worried?"

"It is easy enough for you to talk! If you were in my place . . ."

"But you haven't given me the slightest notion of . . ."

"You will have to guess it now, for there is not time to explain. Sh! We will face the situation firmly."

While we were carrying on this dialogue the warden was marching straight toward us. Soon he was only a few steps away. Never for a moment did

he drop his rigidity, his military composure. One would have taken him for the guardian of the Commander's statue. Balzac had ceased speaking, and his worried look was fixed on the belted apparition before us.

When the warden came alongside Balzac, who still clung to my arm, he said to him in a low, but very impressive voice, "Monsieur de Balzac, this is becoming musical."

And he passed by.

Balzac looked at me, and I looked at Balzac. Both of us were amazed. "Did you hear that," he cried, when the warden had vanished into the grey mist which still enveloped the wood. "Did you hear that? My word! What a superb expression! It should be preserved in alcohol! 'Monsieur de Balzac, this is becoming musical.' Why, that is worth a thousand times the thirty francs I owe him!"

"You owe this warden thirty francs?"

"Yes, I have owed him it for three months. I meant to pay him today — Dutacq brought me some money last evening — but his remark was too gorgeous; we must repeat it over and over; he shall not be paid until tomorrow. 'Monsieur de Balzac, this is becoming musical!'"

From this incident we must return now to the main events of my chronicle: to the fulfillment of my resolution not to omit or to leave obscure any of the matters having to do with the inner life of

Les Jardies, particularly those matters with which I am very familiar, and those in which I played a part.

Balzac, who first said, with fine understanding, "In every man of genius there is a child," was himself a living proof of this true and beautiful remark. A man of genius, he was extraordinarily childlike. The turbulent schoolboy of Vendôme often dominated his leisure hours — hours too infrequent, alas! — and the author of *Physiologie du Mariage,* and *Eugénie Grandet,* and so many other marvelous works, allowed his feet to touch the earth. Then the worries of printing-shops vanished in thin air, and sheets of manuscript were hurled joyously in all directions, as in school when the recess bell rings. There was recess at *Les Jardies.* We played ball, or broke off branches from the chestnut-trees in the wood, or ran down to Sèvres, to Saint-Cloud, to Bellevue, or to Boulogne, where we could joke with the fishermen's wives, and tell them smutty stories. Two or three times a month Balzac experienced these fits of hilarity, and insisted that those of us who chanced to be his guests take part in the gayest and silliest of amusements. He himself lent to these innocent debauches a kind of dutiful gravity, which made them all the more ludicrous.

It is time we mentioned the fact that Balzac had, at *Les Jardies,* one neighbor who aroused all his

spleen. What had this man done to Balzac, who had him haled into court twenty times? What words had passed between them? What damage had he ever done Balzac? This I have never discovered. But Balzac execrated him — execrated him as only he could — and one can say no more than that. He was utterly indifferent to the effect this profound hatred might have upon himself. It was an infectious hatred, which ended by inoculating the rest of us with a perfectly stupid ferocity.

When night came, Balzac would give each of us one of the iron-tipped staffs I have already mentioned, or else an old malacca cane, reddened with age around the bone handle, and rusted at its iron tip, and we would immediately set out, in silence, on our great expedition. Balzac, our chief, would precede us along the footpath which led to the wood of Ville-d'Avray, for in this same wood was located part of the property of his accursed enemy — an enemy whose name I remember perfectly, but which I do not care to record here, for fear, in case he is still living, of endowing him with a popularity which he does not deserve.

This property, spacious, well-kept, situated at the top of a ridge, and beautifully wooded, was surrounded by a wall three or four metres high — a simple wall of rough rocks, piled methodically one atop the other, and held in place by nothing but their own weight. This wall, or to be more exact, this

regular mass of balanced rocks, was the target of Balzac's mysterious vengeance.

Arriving at the foot of this rampart, we would line up at a signal from our captain, each of us with his staff stuck in a gap between the rocks. This first maneuvre accomplished, we would throw our whole weight on our arms. Oh, it was a wonderful sight!

But to continue.

At the supreme moment, when we felt these loosened rocks on the verge of tumbling, we would all cry three times, in unanimous anathema, echoed vigorously by the woods, the name of Balzac's abhorred neighbor. Then the rocks would topple, fall, and go rolling down for several seconds, shattering the sensitive silence of the melancholy forest, from hill to hill, as far as Versailles and Rambouillet.

The damage done, we would soon lose ourselves in the depths of the dark wood, and treading softly as wolves, would return to the tranquillity of *Les Jardies,* where Balzac, delighted with the escapade, would congratulate us on the complete success of our brave attack upon the property of his neighbor.

Eight days afterwards the wall we had demolished would be rebuilt. All the rocks would have been recovered and put back in place. Our duty now was to repeat the operation. We did repeat it. Heaven knows how many times this schoolboy prank was indulged in, and how many times the

warden must have made out an official report of the matter, all to no avail, for lack of information as to who were the culprits. Who ever dreamed of blaming it on the great portrayer of morals, the great philosopher whom all Europe worshipped for his immortal novels — in short, on Balzac?

XII

THESE recollections would be sadly lacking if, in the list of past events which in spite of me sink deeper and deeper into the mists of obscurity, I should fail to mention Victor Hugo's visit to *Les Jardies*. The only one, I think, he ever made. Despite the consistent indifference which Balzac maintained toward contemporary writers, he was pleased and rather proud to receive in his house this celebrated rival. The interview was all the more significant for the fact that up to this time, and I may say, afterwards, as well, there was no real point of contact between these two superior minds. Balzac, whose affected admiration for poetry I have already referred to, did not care, either, for high-sounding, richly-colored prose — done in the manner of Rubens's paintings. A master of *pointillage,* he liked quick, staccato prose, obtained by means of Flemish economy, worked while cold, ground down to facets; genuine, of course, but with the genuineness of diamond dust rather than of the whole diamond. He did not withhold his admiration for the grand passages in *Notre-Dame de Paris,* but secretly he preferred the prose, fine as ground-glass, of Stend-

hal — which, after his own, he considered the model of all prose. Before the Venetian school of painters he would applaud so loudly that one would envy his enthusiasm, but for his study he would buy, you may be sure, nothing but Mieris, Teniers, and Van Ostade.

Furthermore, though Balzac had once or twice, in the *Revue Parisienne*, mentioned Victor Hugo, I doubt if Victor Hugo had ever so much as written Balzac's name. I cannot find a page of his work on which that name appears. A strange, a very strange aversion to find between two such great masters of thought — though one to be found between many other contemporary writers. In this century, as a matter of fact, when one re-reads the authors of the period, one wonders if they could have lived at the same time, in the same country. The sixteenth, the seventeenth, and even the eighteenth century gave rise to intimate, decidedly personal, literary fraternities. They were like families. Being like families, they were often involved in feuds, in ferocious jealousies, and in violent hatreds; but eventually their communal interests stopped the battle, and prevented carnage. Nowadays they do not hate each other; they do not defame each other; they simply do not know each other. Is this an improvement, I wonder?

As a result of some accident befalling the Versailles train, Victor Hugo found it necessary to

come to *Les Jardies* by way of Saint-Cloud, and consequently was late. Balzac was on pins and needles. So impatient was he that he could not stay a minute in any one place. Over and over again he went to see if there was no one coming down the little road. Time after time he paced from terrace to gate, from gate to terrace, lifting his nose with the palm of his hand, as he always did when he was greatly preoccupied.

Finally the gate-bell jingled. It was Victor Hugo.

Balzac, his composure restored, ran to welcome him, and to thank him effusively for bestowing such an honor on his modest country house. There was much more to this welcome than a mere shaking of hands. There was a familiarity of a noble sort. The imagination will do extremely well, as I am at this moment acutely aware, if it succeeds in reproducing for the future, with any degree of verity, the meeting of these two celebrated men under the bright trees of *Les Jardies*. It cannot paint in too brilliant colors the interview of these masters.

Balzac was picturesque in rags. His trousers, lacking braces, did not meet his large, banker's waistcoat; there was also a gap between his trousers and his run-down slippers; the bow of his tie had its points sticking close to his ears; his whiskers were of a luxuriant four-days' growth. As for Victor Hugo, he wore a hat of dubious grey, a faded

blue coat with gold buttons (a garment which in color and shape resembled a saucepan), a frayed black cravat, and, to heighten the whole effect, a pair of green-glass spectacles (protection against the sun's glare) which would have delighted the head clerk in a county sheriff's office.

After a hurried breakfast Balzac proposed to his guest that we take a walk about his property. The three of us made the perilous tour — our last descent, most dangerous of all, bringing us onto the road to Ville-d'Avray.

Victor Hugo, contrary to my expectations, was very sparing in his praise of the property. In vain did Balzac remind him of details in the Memoirs of Saint-Simon; compliments were not forthcoming. He showed a polite interest in the gillyflowers — that was all. I noticed that he had great difficulty in keeping from laughing at Balzac's strange idea of coloring the asphalt of the narrow little walks balanced so precariously along the sides of the garden, in order to lend them a bit of fashionable boulevard style. He did finally, however, discover an opportunity to pay the compliment which politeness demanded. He stopped, struck with admiration, before the superb walnut-tree to which we have so long promised to devote some space.

"At last, here is a tree!" exclaimed Hugo, who up to that time had seen nothing but rather sickly shrubs planted along the edges of the asphalt.

Balzac showed his pleasure at this eulogistic cry.

"Yes, and a famous tree, besides," said he. "I only recently acquired it from the community. Do you know what it bears?"

"As it is a walnut-tree," replied Hugo, "I presume it bears walnuts."

"You are mistaken: it bears fifteen hundred francs a year."

"From walnuts?"

"No, not from walnuts. But it does bear fifteen hundred francs."

We're off again, thought I.

"Fifteen hundred francs, in silver," repeated Balzac.

"Then they must be enchanted walnuts," said Hugo.

"Very nearly. But I owe you some explanation. Without it you could scarcely understand how a single walnut-tree can bring in fifteen hundred francs."

We waited for the explanation.

"Well," resumed Balzac, "this marvelous tree belonged to the community. I bought it for a very large sum. Why? For this reason. An old tradition obliges every inhabitant to dispose of his manure at the foot of this venerable tree — and in no other place."

Hugo drew back.

"Do not be alarmed," said Balzac reassuringly. "Since I have owned the tree the practice has been temporarily discontinued. No inhabitant can escape this personal obligation, however; it is the survival of the feudal law. And think! just think of the quantity of rich manure collected daily at the foot of this urinal tree — municipal manure, which I shall cover with chaff and other vegetable waste, until eventually I have a mountain of fertilizer to sell to farmers, vintners, market-gardeners — all the neighboring proprietors, big and little. What I have here is bars of gold; or more exactly, guano! — guano such as is deposited on lonely islands of the Pacific by myriad birds."

"Oh, yes," replied Hugo in his phlegmatic, Olympian manner, "you are right, my dear Balzac. It is guano minus the birds."

"Minus the birds!" cried Balzac, laughing to the very tip of his monkish chin at this description of his magnificent pile of feudal fertilizer — the unprecedented source of fifteen hundred francs' revenue.

The bell announced luncheon.

We touched on many subjects during lunch, though it is easy to guess that most of them had to do with literature. Like a well-bred host, the master of *Les Jardies* gave the floor to his famous guest, and everyone knows how capable Hugo was of charming his audience with his magnetic style, his

perfectly modulated voice, his precise and authoritative manner.

There having been introduced, among many others, the ever-interesting subject of the theatre — especially interesting to Balzac, who had always looked toward the theatre as toward a promised land — Victor Hugo discussed the pitfalls and evils of theatrical life, and then, at a single stroke, unveiled for Balzac all its marvelous advantages. Until that moment, I am convinced, Balzac had no clear notion of what constituted an author's rights. The revelation dazzled him. Had a diamond-mine opened before him with sun-like brilliance, he could not have been more bewildered, more blinded. He for whom written lines accumulated so laboriously under the point of a rebellious pen, and brought in at first only *centimes* — his genius *was* reckoned in *centimes* by the newspapers — later, by dint of much sweat, *decimes;* and finally, after absolute anguish, *francs* — he listened with the rapture of a martyr hearing the voice of an angel, to the account of Hugo's enormous earnings from plays. Earnings in Paris, earnings from the provinces; so much for three acts, so much for five acts; and then the revivals, the bonuses, the tickets, and heaven knows what all! Sometimes four hundred francs in an evening! All this silver, all this gold, gained while one merely walks about, or better still, while one is asleep, dreaming, with warm feet and softly-

pillowed head! It took Balzac's breath away. And it was not so much the thought of the profits themselves that turned his head, as the thought of large profits earned without physical or mental fatigue. This idea transported him to the third heaven.

I am sure that the eloquent yet accurate description of the financial advantages connected with dramatic authorship, given by Hugo with the unction of Père Grandet and the exactness of a first commissioner of the exchequer, was chiefly responsible for the mania which Balzac had for the theatre, and which possessed him till the end of his life. For days afterwards he regaled me with a multitude of dramatic ideas, comic and serious, which he was to put on the stage at the earliest possible moment. It was only natural it should take some time for him to recover from his fever. Nor was I the only one who heard in confidence these new theatrical enthusiasms, born of that inflammable mind. In the long run, however, nothing much came of them. Nothing very serious resulted from the dramatic fever which, in my estimation, had its beginning at luncheon that day.

The conversation, following a natural descent, drifted then to the matter of the sinful and all but malicious indifference with which the Court of the Tuileries had regarded literature and treated writers, even the most famous — those who, since

1830, by the promotion of a new school, had given life to literature and the theatre. Balzac, with bitterness on his lips, demanded to know if, lacking the patronage of Louis-Philippe, who devoted himself entirely to the middle-class, and elevated them above everyone else, one could at least count on the patronage of the Duke of Orléans, the distinguished wit and connoisseur, who seemed sympathetic with everyone, and whose interest in the arts was so well supported by the young Duchess, his wife. Victor Hugo, by virtue of his familiarity with the household of the young prince, was in a position to answer this question.

"The Duke of Orléans," we were told by Hugo, "asks nothing better than to assume the leadership of a great new movement, in literature or the other arts, thus acting in accordance with the refined taste and highly cultivated mind of the Duchess. But I fear this will never come to pass. You may judge for yourselves. Let me tell you what happened recently at the Château."

Hugo then told us confidentially that the Duke and Duchess, realizing that both their official position and their personal taste demanded that they surround themselves with a circle of eminent writers and artists, had tried giving some evening at-homes in their rooms, as Louis-Philippe himself had done in former days at the Palais-Royal, when he was Duke of Orléans. Theirs were intimate eve-

nings, however, without any political significance, and therefore were quite different from those at the Palais-Royal. At first everything went very nicely, and at the same time very cautiously, for fear of arousing the well-known animosity of *Père* — it was thus that the sons of the king referred among themselves to Louis-Philippe. They knew *Père* from experience.

The place where these admirable and refined meetings were held was christened by the faithful members with a secret name. They called it "The Fireplace of the Duke of Orléans." Later on it became merely "The Fireplace." One would say, "Are you going to the Fireplace tomorrow?" Or, "Were you at the last Fireplace?"

The winter passed satisfactorily. To make use of an obvious figure, the Fireplace did not smoke at all. Either the *Père* knew nothing about it, or else he cared nothing about it, for there were few things he did not know of.

The second winter, our young husband and wife, encouraged by their former success, increased the circle around the Fireplace. More guests mean more noise. One snowy, windy evening, as the guests chatted over the teacups, discussing a Turkish drawing by Decamps, a Florentine sculpture by Froment Meurice, or the style of a new novel, the Duke was requested to report to His Majesty. It was very late. What did the *Père* want of him? The

Père, whom one had thought was in bed a long time ago?

Here is very simply what the father said to the son: Louis-Philippe to the Duke of Orléans:

"Ferdinand, I want you to know that at the Tuileries there should be only one king, only one salon, and one Fireplace. Furthermore, mine gives as much heat as yours. It will please me if you and the Duchess come there and stay."

The Duke of Orléans retired. His Fireplace was extinguished; the meetings, from that evening, ceased; and thereafter no one at the Château had the right to patronize literature and men of letters — the arts, and artists. The chimney-lid was on tight.

Seven years after this delightful luncheon at *Les Jardies,* seven years after this recital by Victor Hugo, a man of letters entered the Tuileries, swept forward by a terrific popular uprising. In the midst of the general plundering, he carried, on a sheet of paper, the last literature lesson of the Count of Paris. He showed it to us, still fresh, at the corner of the Rue Saint Florentin. The man of letters was Balzac; the day, unhappy one for royalty, was the 24th of February, 1848.

Balzac, who had listened attentively and calmly, however he may have been stirred within, to this

bit of history destined, perhaps, to become some day a part of the great chronicle of our time, suddenly, without warning, sank his beautiful teeth in a dean's-pear the size of a melon, and delivered himself of a philippic — be sure the term is used here with absolute appropriateness! — a philippic worthy, in passion and oratorical fervor, to be classed with those of Demosthenes; superior, in fact, to the philippics of the prince of Greek orators in the sense that it did not smell of oil.

Unfortunately there is no adequate way of reproducing this piece of eloquence so interrupted, punctuated, and riddled by bites into the pear, by blows of the knife on the plate and the table, by the splash of words, by explosive looks, by the noise of bottles, by the thunder of curses and the flare of irony.

"Poor, stupid kings! unaware that after they are gone, no one would know, were it not for us, whence they came or whither they went, that they ruled, or even that they existed; what they did, what they thought, what they said. No one would know anything whatever about them! Yet behold! all the monuments of stone, of marble, of bronze, with which they burden the earth, in the hope of perpetuating their memory; all the paintings which they hang in museums to illustrate their noble and useful deeds; all the medals which they distribute

at their coronations and at the celebrations of their victories! Which of these things survive? None! The only thing that survives is writing — the writing we do. Stone crumbles, pictures fade — even the most carefully preserved ones have not lasted five hundred years — the marble turns yellow, it rots, it breaks. Even granite crumbles. Again I say, and I will say it a thousand times! we are the only ones in the world who can save kings and their reigns from oblivion. Their glory, their immortality, is in our hands, and ours alone: in our hands, our ink, our pens. Without Virgil, Horace, Livy, Ovid, who would know Augustus from all the other Augustuses, nephew to Caesar though he was, emperor though he may have been? Without the unsuccessful little lawyer named Suetonius, no one would know the three Caesars from the rest of the dozen whose lives he wanted so much to write. Without Tacitus, one could not distinguish the Romans of his time from the German barbarians. Without Shakespeare the Elizabethan period would practically disappear from English history. Without Boileau, without Racine, without Corneille, without Pascal, without la Bruyère, without Molière, Louis XIV, reduced to his mistresses and his perukes, becomes no more than a coxcomb wearing a crown, who puts me in mind of tavern brawls. Without us, Philippe I would be a name less well known than Philippe the restaurant-keeper, of the

Rue Montorgueil, or Philippe the conjurer. For the sake of Louis-Philippe I, I hope it will be said that in the time of Victor Hugo, of Lamartine, of Béranger, there was a king by the name of Louis-Philippe I."

Balzac's anger lost itself in a third or fourth pear, which he opened with his red mouth, very much as a bomb dives into and shatters a mass of clay.

After this final explosion we rose and went onto the terrace for coffee, where we breathed the bright, sweet air of a lovely day.

We talked for another hour over our cups — a delightful and serious hour, during which Hugo and Balzac discussed, first of all, the French Academy, in which there was, just then, a vacancy. Hugo would not promise much, and Balzac was pessimistic also. He was not in favor — has he ever been? — under the cupola of the Palais Mazarin. The author of *Orientales*, who had just published *Les Rayons et Les Ombres*, then brought up the subject of his forthcoming political candidacy. It was now Balzac's turn to express politely his doubts as to the success of this venture, so thoroughly justified by the tremendous ability of the poet, but so uncertain considering the extreme commercialism of the period, and the people on whom the election depended. Balzac did not fail, however, to enlist his pen in the service of politics; he did not hesitate

to employ his great genius in behalf of the men and the events of his time. He supported them vigorously, as can be seen by examining a contribution of his to the *Revue Parisienne* of July 25, 1840:

"Monsieur Hugo is one of the most brilliant men of our day. In practical matters he shows that good judgment, that accuracy, which is supposed to be lacking in writers, but which is thought to be found in the simpletons listed on ballots. As though men accustomed to handling ideas could not have a knowledge of facts! Those who are capable of the greatest things are capable of the smallest. For sixty years M. d'Aranda found Fielding more difficult than the duties of an Ambassador. 'The affairs of state settle themselves as best they can,' he said, 'but the poet must solve his own problems in a way that will satisfy everyone.' M. Hugo, as well as M. de Lamartine, will some day revenge the insults eternally hurled at literature by the *bourgeoisie*. *If he were to enter politics, rest assured that he would take with him the most extraordinary ability.* His adaptability is unlimited, his finesse is as great as his genius, and in contrast to our professional statesmen, he is possessed of nobility and dignity. As for his elocution, it is marvelous. He will be the most popular speaker imaginable, and his mind will be the keenest. You forget, perhaps, that his two former booksellers are now eligible; that he himself

was not eligible yesterday, but is today. In what an admirable time we are living! The author of *Contrat Social* will not be elected; perhaps he will be haled into police-court."

The sun dropped below the horizon. Victor Hugo spoke of returning to Paris. As I was going there also, I suggested that we make the trip together. We said farewell to *Les Jardies*. Slowly the three of us made our way to Sèvres, where Hugo and I climbed onto a stage-coach that was swifter than lightning, and which eventually set us down on the Rue de Rivoli. Balzac insisted positively on accompanying us as far as Sèvres, in spite of the amount of work lying unfinished on his table — including two or three articles for the *Revue Parisienne*, his literary passion at the time. He put on a colorless old vest of Prussian velvet; tied, by way of a cravat, a piece of old red foulard around his neck, and we set off.

But Balzac did not let Hugo get away until he had acted as ambassador for a young Russian lord, who was wild to meet Hugo and shake hands with him before going back to the snow and the steppes of his native country. Hugo granted very graciously the request of the young foreigner; whereupon Balzac, on his own behalf and on behalf of the Russian, invited us to dine the following Thursday at the Rocher de Cancale. This request was also favor-

ably received. The dinner, or rather the supper, proved very interesting, and I should be glad to recount its salient details had it not occurred so far from *Les Jardies*. As it is, I shall leave that story for my Memoirs.

PART TWO

PART TWO

ONE must never see again what one has loved. Rashly, one day I had the weakness to revisit *Les Jardies*, where I had spent so many charming unforgettable hours under Balzac's roof. I thought that my memories needed to be refreshed at their source; I thought a last pilgrimage was demanded in the interest of that local color which the reader has the right to ask of the biographer, and especially of the biographer of a man, who was himself so exceptionally accurate in his thousand immortal pictures. What had I not told myself to force myself to go to *Les Jardies?* Well, I was wrong to be so firm in that faithfulness, which no one had ever doubted except myself, and, to tell the truth, I was lying to myself when I doubted it. It was rather to satisfy myself that I wanted to see the scene of Balzac's happy days, than to correct, after several years, the faded colors on the canvas of my memory.

No! One must never see again what one has loved. Neither the sea where one bathed in one's youth; nor the paternal mansion at the quiet or noisy

crossroads; nor the country at the foot of the hill, which one investigated in the glorious hours of youth; nor the far-away countries visited with enthusiasm at twenty. It only brings tears to one's eyes, tightens one's heart, and makes one's lips tremble. What is the use? The things seen are not the same any more, and you, yourself, are not the same. The revisited scenes seem wilfully unfamiliar, and you hardly recognize them. You may cry to them: "It is I," but they answer stupidly: "What, you?"

The sadness of Olympio, that magnificent cry uttered by Hugo, who also dared to revisit; that sadness penetrated my heart and did not leave me from the moment I had passed the threshold of *Les Jardies* gate. The gate was the same, but old, old, broken, cracked, painted, repainted, again and again. The pillars which supported it still showed, of course, in the thickness of the carved stones, engraved black letters: *Les Jardies*. But the black had run out of the letters: it was the inscription of a forgotten tomb: in a few years that black furrow will have run out altogether, I told myself: next winter's rains will make those letters quite white and nothing will be seen on the stone, nothing! and the letters which spell the word of which Balzac was so proud: *Les Jardies!* will have disappeared.

I ran to the gate, but it took some minutes of indecision before I could lift my arm and grasp the

iron ring: I was soon to hear a sound which I remembered so well! However, I rang. . . . It was the sound of yesteryear; I recognized it; but it was muffled, dead, lazy; you were much more lively, little bell, when creditors rang you than now, when you are only the bell of rich people.

How they made me wait before they opened! So long that I caught myself repeating the sacred phrase used by those to whom, for a thousand reasons, Balzac would not open. *They must all be dead!*

It was because I had not seen a second gate, a dreadful mongrel gate, opened lower down, in the prolongation of the wall. It had not existed in my time, I was going to say in Louis XIV's time. The gardener had given himself a gate. It is true that the gardener's house had become a master's house. Damnation! Had everyone become rich at *Les Jardies?* Balzac would never have tolerated that mongrel gate near the lordly double gate with the two knockers through which he entered. What would Saint-Simon have said?

I entered, however, but sighing, through that vulgar gate; a valet, a white apron tied around his waist, came to open it. "What were Monsieur's wishes? Did Monsieur wish to buy or to rent the house which M. de Balzac had once occupied?" The double-barreled question overcame me. I had come, that was all. I should have thought that the

house was being sold or rented, and that I would be asked what I came for. The unexpected quandary in which I found myself, however, was not as great as it would have been if the house had not been for rent or for sale. I said to the valet: "I want to rent the house." "Come in, Monsieur."

An enormous dog was growling behind the door. Was it Turk who had been trained to silence if the ring was supposed to be that of a creditor? "How old is the dog?" I asked the valet. "Two years old." "It is not Turk! He would be much older! And, besides, Turk had never been so fat." And the valet was looking at me, probably saying to himself: "Who is this gentleman who wants to rent *Les Jardies* and who talks to me about Turk?"

Sorrow upon sorrow. Can this really be, I thought, the chalet designed, built, tormented by Balzac, but Heavens! how they have improved it, the profaners! It is full of stairs! And, we had so few of them! They have even dared to put inside the house the stairs he had on the outside wall. How could one find one's way about a place where everything was in order now!

However, once accustomed to the disadvantages of all those improvements I was able to find my way about. I then went from room to room, from bedroom to bedroom, from secret door to secret door, leading my guide, surprised beyond measure at my knowledge of the place.

THE VILLA OF LES JARDIES, VILLE D'AVARY

I had reached the roof, where Balzac and I often went to breathe freely the country, the woods, the horizon, the river, the immensity; a climb we generally would make after Balzac, in a bad temper, had said: "Come! let us go and spit on Paris!"

It was there that another disillusionment, not less poignant, was awaiting me.

Les Jardies, which I had left bald, bare, with only poor little shivering shrubs planted by Balzac, was hidden by real trees, cut in pyramids, opening like fans, contrasting with the cedars; proud, elegant, dressed in the latest fashion. Here, beautiful lime-trees; there, Japanese varnish-trees, which are appropriate in the most beautiful parks; there, chestnut-trees as fashionable as those in the Tuileries. Where had those asphalt paths gone of which I spoke in the first part of my memoirs? The shovel had torn them up, and grass had covered the places where they were, and careful landscape gardening had almost leveled the unsightly ground which sloped toward the road to Sèvres: the slope had not wholly disappeared, such a miracle was impossible, but it had been smoothed off in the middle, and did not seem to slope so much. Of course, it was better. And yet I knew I would cry over the loss of those trees the highest of which, in Balzac's time, never reached higher than the spotted back of Turk as he heartily chased a hen. "How beautiful my trees are!" Balzac used to say: "They keep me from

seeing Turk." Illusion of a landowner! Where I had left an asparagus field, I found a park.

Decidedly *Les Jardies* existed only in the rosy mirage of the past.

Even the trees had left us behind! I would not rest one second in that park, under their insultingly beautiful shade. That word shade reminds me of what the gardener of *Les Jardies* said to Jules Janin, when our celebrated critic went incognito to visit them: "Yes, yes, Monsieur Balzac has a lot of property *under the sun.*"

He was telling the truth only too well, for everything was very much under the sun at *Les Jardies.*

A kind of melancholy mist was beginning to veil my eyes and my soul, at the top of that house, from which I viewed my disillusionment. I had vertigo: I felt as if I were standing dizzily upon the sand-dunes of the past. I went down hastily; and as I was going down I noticed something I could have seen on my way up, if I had not been so agitated, which would have lessened the bitterness of what had saddened my eyes. All the rooms in *Les Jardies* were furnished. Furnished! I saw tables, wardrobes, mirrors, clocks, curtains! I was choking.

"Well!" said the valet, "what do you think of the accommodation?"

"*Les Jardies!* An accommodation! You are . . . ?"

"If it suits Monsieur to rent the house?"

"I spoke of renting! . . . Oh, yes, forgive me! What is the price?"

The valet was not at all pleased with his inattentive visitor.

"Two thousand francs," he said, "for the rest of the season."

"Two thousand francs . . . it is rather dear."

"Oh, no, Monsieur; the water is very good here."

"Well, if the water is very good . . . You said two thousand francs?"

"Two thousand francs, yes, Monsieur."

We had already said it many times. To get out of that vicious circle I remembered very appropriately the blessed objection which I use every time I am caught by the expensiveness of a rent thrust upon me. I used it: "Are there stables?"

The valet answered:

"No, Monsieur."

"Well, then, it is impossible."

"But . . ."

"No! if there are no stables, it is absolutely impossible."

If he had told me: "There are stables," I would have asked, "For how many horses?"; and if he had answered, "For two," I would have said: "I must have accommodation for six."

My visit was over.

I left *Les Jardies* distressed and despondent, and

telling myself that I would never go back there in all my life.

I had still a quarter of an hour to wait for the arrival of the train from Versailles to Paris. Here is how I spent it: from the estate itself it had been impossible for me to ascertain the condition of the famous wall, which I had not seen for years, that nightmare of Balzac's agitated dreams, the wall so often torn down and so often rebuilt. It was quite a long walk to that wall, famous for all time. In spite of the heat, a stormy heat very hard to bear, and the lack of shade on the way, I reached the wall. We recognized each other, I think; because each stone laid during my time seemed to say to me: "They think us very sound, but wait till some winter . . . !" And, indeed, . . . but I no longer have the right to pass any remarks about the stability of all those granite blocks, my friends once. We, nevertheless, laughed together discreetly, until one of them, moving in its plaster socket, called to my attention an inscription I had not seen. I read through a mist of tears — For Sale or Rent, *Les Jardies*, formerly the property of M. de Balzac.

The disagreeable shriek of the train was calling to me.

Good-bye, saddest and most harrowing place of all, not only because the one we all loved is no longer there, but because others are there in his place.

The disagreeable shriek of the train had never

seemed more pleasant to my ear. Quick! Quick! To Paris! Where there are seventeen thousand cabs, two thousand omnibuses, twenty-seven theatres, and twelve hundred thousand egoists, who keep you from thinking of anything except keeping away from the wheels, or of choosing from all the spectacles the one which will most effectively take you from your ordinary cares, or of living from day to day without a thought for things past. Did they ever exist?

We'll go back to *Les Jardies,* but this time through the door of the past; we'll see it again, as it was when Balzac lived, or almost lived, there, already a little unfaithful to his favorite residence.

He was fleeing from Paris, and yet Paris attracted him constantly; how could it have been otherwise?

His friends, his family, his admirers, his booksellers, his public, his fame, his reputation, and let us add, his enemies, were all in Paris; real enemies, fictitious ones, but he combined them so well, that he made them legion. And sometimes he provoked these innumerable enemies to a fight in the lists, he called to them spear in hand, he was eager to fight them face to face; again, calmer, he was content to regard them with sovereign contempt. At bottom, he thought a great deal of ways to neutralize them with cleverness, politics, trickery, and especially, without appearing too personally tor-

mented by the desire, to conciliate them. It was however his unique desire; as I shall show by the tale of the extraordinary project he mentioned to me one day, before he told anyone else, in a Saint-Cloud café where we were lunching.

Before giving the details of a plan of association which really existed, and which lasted several years — three at least — I shall tell a rather amusing incident about that lunch at Saint-Cloud. It was told later by everyone, and had all the vogue of a lie, yet it was true in all its details. The fresh air, the morning breeze, the sparkling river, perhaps also the old prejudice that one must be hungry because one rose early, all had sharpened Balzac's appetite. He had the hunger of a Grand-Gousier. After having swallowed two beautiful rare cutlets and a golden mountain of smelts, he spoke to me thus:

"Before attacking the subject which brought us here, I'd like to furnish my stomach with some supplementary dishes." The subject was grave: the wish was natural, but hard to fulfil in the river locality of Saint-Cloud, where, once done with a chop, fried gudgeons and the classical matelote, the innkeepers are helpless. However, to comply with Balzac's hunger, I knocked, with the rough corner of my heavy glass, the wood of the rustic and uncovered table on which we were lunching, and the innkeeper's son hastened to come up the pine stairs

from the kitchen. Here are Balzac's questions and the waiter's answers:

"Have you braised leg of mutton?"

"The last cut, Monsieur, was served to an Englishman not a quarter of an hour ago."

"Fricassee of chicken?"

"At this season of the year, Monsieur, chickens are very hard to get."

"We'll respect their hardness; have you got fricandeaux?"

"Not until five."

"Have you got any sphinx?" I asked, impatiently in my turn. "Sphinx? I'll run to the kitchen to see," he answered. "You'll bring two portions?" "Yes, Monsieur." The waiter disappeared.

Balzac then said to me: "Did I hear properly, did you ask him for some sphinx?" "Of course, you heard properly! You insist on demanding, in Saint-Cloud, in a fisherman's cabin, a complete Parisian lunch, with cold meats and entremets. You might just as well ask for the sphinx, and I did."

The waiter returned. With a perfectly straight face, he stood on the first step, and said: "Monsieur, we are out of sphinx!" I can still see Balzac's face, drawn tight by his astonishment at that answer, opening out and reaching the moonlike proportions of irresistible laughter. He threw his napkin into the air; and then, resting his elbows upon the table, he laughed so that he almost shook the fisherman's

hut, and frightened the pigeons which were picking up grain on the window sill. Everything around us laughed, the floor, the ceiling, the benches, the plates, the knives, the lead forks, everything, except the innkeeper's son. He was very serious and his answer had been sincere. His master had evidently asked him to always say, whatever dish was asked for: "We are out of it," and never: "We haven't got any." We had asked for some sphinx: they were out of it!

Balzac replaced the sphinx with a piece of cheese and some salad seasoned with an oil which resembled olive oil, but very faintly. Olive oil in Saint-Cloud! Another sphinx!

At dessert — was there a dessert? — when coffee was served more probably, he set himself at last to tell me why we were together in Saint-Cloud, at such an early hour.

"You know, of course," he said to me, "that, during the first years of the Restoration, some men of letters, whose importance I won't discuss just now, left the famous singing and drinking society of the Caveau and united, much more ambitiously, though secretly, under the name the *Compagnie de la Fourchette*. The spirit and the results of the association are known today. Each of the members swore, if he ever should enter the Académie française, to use all his influence to help his companions to become members, and to choose candidates only

from the Company of the Fourchette. After a certain number of years, it was inevitable that all should enter the Academy, and it happened. The Caveau entered to a man.

"I am not thinking," Balzac went on, "of using the same tactics; nothing succeeds twice in this world. And, besides, the Academy does not stir me a bit; people think otherwise, they are wrong. If I am made a member, all right . . . if not . . . but I'll go on."

He went on thus: "I do not like journalism, I'll even go as far as to say I hate it: it is a blind force, dear, wicked, wild, amoral, traditionless, aimless; it is like the butchers; it kills at night, to eat in the morning what it has killed. But we have to bow to it, for it is a force, the force of the century. That force leads to everything, to all points of the circle; it is the only one today which has the considerable power of upsetting, and consequently the power of reinstating that which it throws down. See what the Debats, the Constitutionnel, the Presse, and even the Siecle can do, each in their own way: I defy the government to name a minister, a tax collector, an admiral, or a rural policeman, without thinking a little, or rather a great deal, of the effect that these diverse appointments will produce upon the skin of the press.

"Royalty is subordinate to it. Thiers reigns and Bertin governs; when it is not Bertin it is Emile

Girardin, until it is Louis Perrée's turn. What is that, if not the rule of journalism?

"But," Balzac went on, "I seem to teach you, my friend, who has been, who is, and who probably will always be journalistic, the formidable, unprecedented power of journalism."

"I am still listening."

"Then I shall go on: Since the blinding power of journalism is not denied by anyone, here is what I want: I want us to be able to use as we like, to our own profit — do you understand me? — that terrible machine to place ourselves and our friends on all the productive pinnacles of art, science, administration, politics. I desire that, when we choose from among us a librarian, he shall be taken; a deputy, he shall be elected; an academician, he shall be accepted; a professor, he shall be appointed."

"But . . ."

"Do not interrupt! What must we do? We must have on each newspaper, whatever its politics are, a member of our society, a member who will help us, defend us, who will make our candidate prevail everywhere and always. And when the government shall see that that candidate is helped by the spears of the *Presse*, as well as by the halberds of the *Quotidienne*, and by the guns of the Journal des Debats, and by the muskets of the Siècle, the government will have to accept our choice or submit to it. It is thus that the world is governed, believe me; it looks

as if it went voluntarily, as the horse obeys the cavalier; but it obeys the brake, the spur, the riding-whip, and the knees. Let us see now — have you any objection to this colossal project?"

"I have fifteen thousand and one," I answered.

"Tell me the last one," went on Balzac, "I shall probably have to dispense with the fifteen thousand others."

"Where will you find the journalists on whose loyalty and devotion you'll be able to count?"

"Their own interest will be a guarantee of their devotion."

"I know journalists better than you do: they are more lazy than ambitious; since they don't have to ask for anything for themselves, they won't agitate themselves when it means asking for other people; and your society, whose name I do not yet know, will evaporate like water when you try to use it to advance yourself."

"You are mistaken, ah, there is where you are magnificently mistaken," cried Balzac, thinking he had crushed my most vital objection; "your journalists' ambitions are only disguised! The one who writes the *Fait-Paris* wants to write the serial; the one who writes the serial would like to do the leading political article, and the one who writes the political article would like to become Master of Requests, deputy, State Councillor and the rest."

"Of course, there is a grain of truth in what you

say, but the fundamentals of which I speak remain the same. The real journalist is only a journalist; he lives and dies a journalist; be assured of that."

"I am so little sure of it, that I shall see my project through, with or without you, and I lay the first stone of it now. Decide, do you want to be in it, or don't you?"

"Will your society have dinners?" I said to Balzac, who I saw was very much upset at having confided in someone so ill-disposed to follow him.

"What: of course we shall dine! Once a week, as a matter of fact. We'll only meet at those weekly dinners so that there won't be any shadows on the delicate brows of our *concierges*, who might be too astonished, on certain days, to see so many people with suspicious mien passing in front of them. Shall we dine!" Stretching his arms above me, Balzac said pontifically: "I make you the first member of our future society.

"Now that that's done, let us walk along the Seine," he added, "and think about the choice of journalists for our society."

We left the table.

As we went through the restaurant, we expressed our regrets to our host that we should have been too late to taste the sphinx, and started towards the Seine.

A few minutes later an extraordinary dialogue took place between Balzac and myself, for whose

oddities I should have been prepared, if I had remembered that the greatest painters of the human heart, the finest analysts of our weaknesses and our foibles, are the first to become models as well as painters. Thus, I saw Balzac, obliged to choose amongst the journalists of the time to make up the list of founding members for his society, unable to name one, because he hated them all with a blind hate, and saw little difference between the best and the worst of them. When I named one, Balzac, instead of seeking earnestly for a motive to admit him, found, or invented, twenty motives for plunging him into the abyss. Things happened almost in the following way:

"Does A. suit you?"

"He's a hypocrite! When we meet, he shakes hands with me, and then with that same hand he writes three nasty articles about the *Physiologie du mariage*. Don't speak to me of that Tartuffe!"

"All right, we'll leave the Tartuffe. What do you think of B.?"

"He deserves to be hung! He is a courtier; he dines every Thursday with A.!"

"If B. dines every Thursday with A. . . . that's different . . . Will you take C.?"

"No, and don't ask me why."

"I won't ask you why. Will you take D.?"

"Not a chance!"

"Would E. please you?"

"He's a scoundrel! He dared to say that an old lady, with whom I sometimes spend the autumn months in the country, furnished me with the subject for my last novel. Dastardly scoundrel!"

"Do you know that our list is not getting very well filled?"

"How many names are there already?"

"None."

Balzac burst out laughing.

"How difficult it is, you see, to seize a just man by the hair in that unhealthy profession," he said. "Let us go on choosing."

"All right! Shall we put F. on the list?"

"Huh!"

"What?"

"Yes and no. He is a nice man, doubtless; but he has no real talent. When in his turn, he'll want to be something, what shall we do with him?"

"We'll give him a scientific mission. The scientific missions are a pack that fits every donkey. He'll study *the influence of the tails of codfish upon the undulations of the Ocean, from the point of view of mores and religion.* But you are right, he would not be of any use to us. Out!"

"Out," said Balzac joyfully; "out with him!"

"Would G. suit? He is charming. He is witty and has a good disposition?"

"He is all right, but he is on such bad terms with his colleagues, that we would expose him to murder

if we accepted him in our society. He is out for love of humanity."

"Let us pass on to H.," I said, sighing.

"Let us pass on! Pass on! Pass on quickly!"

"Ah! He does not please you either? . . ."

"Some day I shall tell you the nasty trick he played on me when I had my printing press. And, besides, in the firme Béchet, he has been talking about me, in such terms . . . No H."

"I. seems to me to have qualities which would figure advantageously on our list."

"Yes . . . but . . . yes. He suits me well enough."

"At last!"

"Put him down momentarily," said Balzac.

"Momentarily! Only momentarily!"

In short, the result was, that, at the end of a two hour walk, so strong was Balzac's antipathy to journalism, stronger than any other of his feelings, that he had been able, from nine names, which I had already chosen mentally before presenting them to him, to accept only one, and that one only temporarily.

However, as it was written that that amusing idea of Balzac's was to break its cocoon and come out into broad daylight to the great joy of its inventor, the famous Mutual Aid Society was finally composed of the names we shall mention.

It will be seen with pride that if the choice had

been hard, it was largely compensated by the difficulties faced and finally overcome.

Balzac, who wanted some mystery for the birth of his favorite creation, told the first affiliated that the first meeting place would be the Jardin des Plantes, where we met, one beautiful Saturday afternoon, about four o'clock, in the main entrance of the Museum. It was from there we were to start for an unknown restaurant, also discovered by Balzac, a short distance away.

We'll come back to it shortly.

From the rear of the main entrance, through the side ones, came forth, like the conspirators at the Ambigu-Comique, Granier de Cassagnac, followed by Théophile Gautier, then Louis Desnoyers, then Eugène Guinot, then Alphonse Karr, then T. Merle, then Altaroche, then Balzac, then I. All men of letters, a little astonished to find themselves together, especially for the brotherly aim explained earlier. But Balzac was really the born high-priest of such impossible marriages.

After the usual forms of politeness had been gone through, we linked arms in a somewhat new intimacy and followed Balzac.

Balzac, pleased and delighted, left the Jardin des Plantes, followed the Quai of the Halles aux Vins, along the Entrepôt, and, when he was between the Rue des Fossés Saint-Bernard and the Rue de Poissy, almost opposite the Pont de la Tournelle,

he said to us: "Gentlemen, here we are!" What impossible place had he chosen for our first corporate dinner?

I saw, where we had stopped, neither the shadow of a restaurant, nor the profile of a café, but only something hidden, looking like a wine-shop in a suburb. I looked up to discover some sign which would be more illuminating than our inscrutable guide; and I only saw a shapeless one, hung at the height of the second floor of a narrow house, making a rather perilous angle with the wall to which it was attached. Upon that sign, which may still be at the same place for all I know, I could distinguish an enormous truck horse painted red, standing on its hind legs, with strong neck and shoulders, and wild mane, and under its hoofs those words which one has often read if one has visited any of the thirty or forty thousand communes in France: "*Au Cheval Rouge.*"

We were at the *Cheval Rouge.*

Balzac had taken us to the inn of the *Cheval Rouge;* he had our initiation dinner prepared at the *Cheval Rouge!*

It is not without intention that I repeat that sign painted with greasy oil: *Au Cheval Rouge!*

The society founded by Balzac, with the purpose mentioned above, was to take, and did take, the name of Society of the Cheval Rouge.

The room we entered was worthy of the crudity

of the sign; it was a shed in the yard, between a well and a place for empty barrels.

The red horses dined pretty badly that first day; but enthusiasm and wines made them put up with the mediocrity of the food.

Perhaps I wrote down the word enthusiasm too easily. There was a certain stiffness under our ardour; many hostile twigs resisted their entwinement in the friendly chain Balzac was trying to form.

Thus the Charivari, in the person of its principal representative, had never burned much incense for Balzac; Alphonse Karr and Balzac would never have thrown themselves in the water to save each other; as for myself I did not feel the same toward all my stable companions; I had more than once been hurt, and I had, in my turn, struck back generously.

All that elbow rubbing, those literary slaps, all those blows of a not so distant past, sometimes came to the surface.

If smiles were sweet, if the glasses touched each other noisily, if all fraternized, complete sincerity was not the background of the picture. From time to time there were mocking silences.

One writer alone, only one, among all those guests of diverse origin, united all our sympathies and loved all of us. It was the kind, excellent, witty editor of the *Quotidienne,* T. Merle. Merle, with the

noble and beautiful face, with unlimited memory, garnished with all sorts of flowers, like the countryside of the beautiful South from which he came, represented harmony among us.

He was our superior by his age, and also by his literary reputation, real and undisputed; but he was also our superior by the merits of his exquisite conversation and delicate knowledge of all the personages and important matters of his time. From the Eighteenth Century he had kept the Voltairian irony without the sharpness of atheism. The fanaticism of royalty was not allied in him with the violence of 1815 and of the *Drapeau Blanc*. He told us how Désaugiers used to sing; he joked as Louis XVIII had joked, and he had had as many love affairs as the brilliant Lauzun, who surely never had the rare bodily perfection, nor the radiant beauty of face of our dear and regretted Merle.

He had only one fault, but that fault was a great one, very great for us, as it rendered him useless to the society of the *Cheval-Rouge*, into which, to tell the truth, we had not got him without a certain amount of intimidation. Merle had not one particle of ambition; he was nothing, he had never wanted to be anything, and he did not want to become anything. "I'll help you as much as you like, as much as I can," he said, "but, I beg you, don't do anything for me."

But Balzac's eloquence made him promise he

would take a post as librarian. We all promised to work for the realization of Balzac's promise. He accepted also the task of ordering our weekly dinners and of seeing that they ran smoothly. It took less urging to get him to do that.

Merle was a gold fork fallen from the skies. No one since Nero, since Lucullus, since Grimod de la Reynière, has known how to eat as he did, although he was a little too addicted to the salt-meats of the South.

Rougemont, Brazier, and he, three giants in their size and their stomachs, have left undying gastronomical souvenirs at the *Vendanges de Bourgogne*, at the *Cadran Bleu*, at *Balaine's* and at the *Rocher de Cancale*. They lived well.

Let us come back to the dinner at the *Cheval Rouge*.

At dessert, the rules of the society were read, and they can be summed up thus: Each will belong to all, and all will belong to each. It was decided that nothing would ever be written about the composition and the aims of the Society of the *Cheval-Rouge*. It was also decided that we would come back to dine at the same restaurant a week after the first banquet, and we did, but we soon got tired of that senseless rush to the *Pont de la Tournelle*. We changed our inn, but did not change our name.

The *Cheval-Rouge* went to dine, some weeks after its inauguration, to the *Vendanges de Bourgogne*, an

historical, large restaurant which must be recalled to the mind of the present generation. It has heard about it, of course, but it has not seen it developing in a monumental way, on the side of the Canal Saint-Martin, at the entrance of the Faubourg de Temple.

There, the dinners without being more expensive, although they were far too high, were better than at the *Cheval-Rouge*.

We changed our meeting-place several times. It was not always the best we pursued in our numerous movings: Balzac feared that by frequenting too long the same restaurant we would reveal to the waiters, from the waiters to the masters, and from the waiters and masters to all the world, the existence of our society. His fear of that was very amusing.

What, finally, did that famous society of the *Cheval-Rouge* produce, after many years' existence? Many dinners, many articles written in the papers praising Balzac, while Balzac wrote nothing about his colleagues; and it did not bring any position, nor the slightest advantage, to the other members. Balzac alone had believed much in the society, Balzac alone profited by it.

As for Granier de Cassagnac, Louis Desnoyers, Alphonse Karr, Altaroche Merle, who, tired of hoping, went to wait for his librarian's post in a better world, they never believed heartily in the society of the *Cheval-Rouge*, whose sign alone, withstand-

ing the years, the revolutions, the humidity of the Seine, the dryness of summers, still prances, I suppose, and throws red into the charmed eyes of those who go from the Pont de la Tournelle to the Jardin des Plantes.

We said earlier that Balzac was beginning to be less faithful to *Les Jardies*. Although his best friends did not know it immediately, he was dividing his time between his country residence and the house in the Rue Basse, at Passy. It was not impossible, one can even say that it was very probable, that he had a third and even a fourth abode.

As for the house in the Rue Basse, at Passy, to talk only of that one, there was a time when he invited us there as much as to *Les Jardies;* later, he invited us less to *Les Jardies* than to Passy; then we only went to Passy and *Les Jardies* was used less and less. We even avoided speaking about it. We had so often seen Balzac saddened when it was mentioned that we were warned. We only spoke of it when he did.

First is the period of his alternate residence at *Les Jardies* and at Passy.

The house in the Rue Basse, No. 19, at Passy, has been very well described by an excellent writer in the intimate pages of his memoirs which he wrote for himself, though expecting them to be read by everybody. M. Solar, once editor of the celebrated *Epoque*, wrote as follows:

"Afflicted by the editorship of a paper," says M. Solar in those memoirs from which I am borrowing to enrich my work — "I had written to M. de Balzac to ask him for a novel. Balzac gave me an appointment at his house. In his letter, which I have kept, he had had the forethought to give me the password to reach him. I had to ask for Madame de Bri ——

"At the time of our appointment, Balzac lived in the village of Passy, at No. 19, Rue Basse.

"I went to Passy, I braved the sharp stones of the Rue Basse, which is very steep, despite its hypocritical name, and I asked the concierge of No. 19 for Madame de Bri . . .

"That concierge, as full of defiance as a thunderbolt, looked me straight in the eyes; hardly reassured by his examination, but reinforced by the password, he muttered: 'Go to the first floor.' His gaze followed me as I went up, not through politeness, I am sure.

"I went up to the first floor.

"There I found, firm on the landing, the wife of the concierge. She was mounting guard at the threshold of a door leading to a porch.

"'Madame de Bri . . . , please?'

"The porch had double stairs.

"'Go down to the yard,' said she.

"I had gone up one side and I went down the other, as one would upon a double ladder.

"At the bottom of the stairs, I met the small daughter of the door-keeper, new obstacle who barred the way to me. I had recourse to the talisman, to my open Sesame! For the third time I repeated: 'Madame de Bri. . . , please?'

"The little girl, with a mysterious and cunning air, pointed with her finger to an old charterhouse, deep in the yard, cracked, in ruins, hermetically closed. It looked like one of the lonely houses in the suburbs of Paris, which have been waiting for a quarter of a century, behind their bleary windows, for a mythological tenant. I rang hopelessly, convinced that my ring, amid all that dust, could only waken a tribe of bats or of mice.

"To my great surprise, the door creaked loudly, and an honest German servant appeared upon the threshold. She was alive. I repeated once more: 'Madame de Bri . . . ?'

"A lady about forty, with a fat, nun-like and restful face, a nun attendant to the turning-box, came slowly out of the quiet blue shadow of the hall. At last it was she. She was really the last word in this domiciliary enigma, she was Madame de Bri. . . . She pronounced my name distinctly, accompanying it with a beatific smile, and opened the door of M. de Balzac's study herself.

"I entered the sanctuary. My eyes were attracted first by a colossal bust of the author of the *Comédie Humaine*, by David d'Angers: a magnificent work

BALZAC AT PUSSY

in the most beautiful of marbles, a masterpiece of that restrained sculptor who still remained pre-eminent in his portrait sculpture. This monumental bust was laid upon a base into which a clock had been set, meaning of course that Balzac had vanquished time. I suppose that was David's idea, although Balzac did not err by having too little modesty and was quite capable of being the author of the symbolic base.

"It is well-known that on the pedestal of a plaster statue of Napoleon he had written with his pen these rash words: 'To finish with the pen what he began with the sword.' That statue could be seen in his home in the Rue des Batailles.

"A glass door, opening upon a small garden planted with clumps of weak lilac, lighted up the study, whose walls were covered with frameless pictures and pictureless frames.

"Opposite the glass door, a bookcase: upon the shelves of which were spread in great disorder the *Année Littéraire,* the *Bulletin des Lois,* the *Biographie Universelle,* the *Dictionnaire de Bayle,* etc. On the left, another bookcase which seemed reserved for contemporaries. Your works, dear Gozlan, were there, among those of Alphonse Karr and Madame de Girardin.

"In the centre of the room was a small table — his work table, of course — upon which was a single book: a French dictionary.

"Balzac, wrapped in an immense monk's robe, once white, a cloth in his hand, was drying amorously a cup of Sèvres china. He had hardly caught sight of me when he began, with an enthusiasm almost fanatical, the extraordinary monologue which I reproduce word for word. 'Do you see this cup?' he said to me. 'Yes.' 'It is a masterpiece by Watteau. I found the cup in Germany and the saucer in Paris. I estimate the value of that precious china to be no less than two thousand francs, matched by the most marvellous chance.' The price struck me dumb: two thousand francs. I took the cup for politeness' sake, and also to hide an incredulous smile. Balzac went on courageously with his phenomenal exhibition: 'Think, I beg you, that canvas, which represents the Judgment of Paris, is Girgione's best. The museum offers me twelve thousand francs. TWELVE THOUSAND francs.' 'Which you refused,' I added softly. 'Which I refused, refused point blank. Do you know,' he cried, excitedly, 'do you know that I have here far more than four hundred thousand francs' worth of pictures and objects d'art?' And with fiery eyes, flying hair, trembling lips, quivering nostrils, legs wide apart, his arm out like a side-show barker's on a fair day, in full daylight and on the public square, he went on thus: 'Admire, admire this portrait of a woman by Palma the Elder, painted by Palma himself, the great Palma, the Palma of Palmas, because there

were as many Palmas in Italy as there were Medicis in Holland. It is the pearl of the works of that great painter, a pearl himself amongst the artists of his magnificent period. Altesse, salute.' I saluted.

"'Now here is the portrait of Madame Greuze painted by the inimitable Greuze. It is the first drawing for all Madame Greuze's portraits; the first draft! the one the artist never does again. Diderot has written of that suave drawing twenty delicate, sublime, divine pages of his *Salon*. Read his Salon; look at the article about Greuze, read that admirable piece.

"'This is the portrait of a Chevalier of Malta; it has cost me more money, more time and diplomacy than would have been necessary to conquer a kingdom in Italy. An order from the pope alone could open the frontier of the Roman States. The customs let it go with awe. If that painting is not by Raphael, Raphael is not the first painter in the world. I can ask any sum I want.' 'But will you get it?' 'If there is a millionaire in the world who has taste, if not, I'll give it in homage to the Czar of Russia. I want a million or gratitude. Let us go on.

"'That ebony piece encrusted with mother-of-pearl belonged to Marle de Medici. Monbro values it at sixty thousand francs. These two small statues are by Cellini. — This one is by an unknown Cellini of the Seventeenth Century. The three of them are worth their weight in gold. Let us go on. — Let us

go on. — I had these two vases of old Chinese china bought in Peking, they belonged to a mandarin of the first class. I say old Chinese china, because you are too much versed in these things, M. Solar, to mix it with china simply from China. The Chinese have had no more of that miraculous china since the thirteenth century. They themselves today buy it for fabulous sums, and get it back from all the European countries which have it. With these two vases, I could have millions and innumerable high honors in Peking. — 'But it is very far, my dear M. de Balzac.' — 'Let them not force me to it. It is in vain that they would offer me all the products of Sèvres in exchange.'

"I felt that it was becoming indispensable to put the Gascon on a level with the Tourangeau, for the already very compromised honor of the Garonne, and I cried in my turn: 'The products of Sèvres! But M. de Balzac, you would lose in that bargain, you would be done! But to house all those marvels about which you speak so eloquently, and that I admire as much, if not more than you do, you need a Louvre.'

"'I am building it,' my fearless interlocutor answered, without batting an eyelid. 'Yes, I am building it.' — 'All right, you make me happy, M. de Balzac.' 'The big room, the principal room, the Apollo room, as I will call it when the time has come, has cost me already a hundred thousand

francs.' 'A hundred thousand francs?' 'Yes, Monsieur, a hundred thousand francs.' 'It is prodigious!' 'It will be! All the walls are covered from top to bottom with malachite.' — 'With malachite.' — 'Yes, something like diamond.'

"However unbelievable this conversation may appear, I swear to its complete exactitude.

"It may be asked why Balzac made these gigantic exaggerations. It will even be asked if he did it intentionally or if he did not naturally follow the natural bent of his mind, in diving thus into that bottomless sea of rubbish, and bringing forth pearls, topazes, malachites and golden sand. I must say that I firmly believe that Balzac had an aim in thus blinding my eyes with the quick, changing reflections of all those millions struck in the mint of the thousand and one nights and before the image of the Sultan Haroub-al-Raschid. I came to ask for prose for my paper; in his eyes I was only a buyer. I came to him to buy copy. He had calculated rightly, in a general way, but falsely in my case! If I show this merchant that I am a millionaire, he won't bargain, because one does not bargain with people who don't need to sell. That time, it was he who behaved like a merchant; the rôles were changed: I had to take the one that was left. I behaved like an artist, and I conceived a great esteem for him when I accepted at once the figures of his proposition. The bargain was struck. I went away

carrying the proofs, curiously crossed out and worked over, of 'The Last Incarnation of Vautrin,' one of Balzac's most formidable masterpieces."

Without wishing to upset this curious description of Balzac's study, without pretending to rob it of its delightful irony, we must say that it leaves the reader too much in doubt about the real value of the furnishings of the house at Passy.

Though it was far from representing the great value which Balzac's Oriental imagination gave it, it had cost him a great deal of money. Some pieces justified his superior taste, and especially testified to real expenditure. Thus, the piece in ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl, of which M. Solar speaks, and around which Balzac turned delightedly, was worthy of the Louvre. To put public admiration on a level with his, and perhaps also for a less abstract reason, he begged me to describe it in a paper for which I sometimes wrote, and I did so immediately, to his great joy as a collector. When the article appeared it was illustrated with two wonderful drawings, correct in every detail. Perhaps the reader would be glad to have a precise though limited idea of Balzac's furniture, and will pardon me, on that account, if I give here a sketchy inventory of the two carved pieces, only one of which drew M. Solar's attention.

These two pieces would be called today simply Catherine de Medici's chest of drawers and Henri

IV's desk; that is to say two jewels of the Florentine school, the best time of the Medicis.

Of pure and elegant design, those two pieces were in ebony with streaks of gold. The chest of drawers, worthy of a queen, had blunted angles, with tail-pieces and feet turned spirally at the angles. Sirens, inlaid in iridescent mother-of-pearl, like all the decoration, formed the centre of the folding-doors and the drawers. In the midst of arabesques and flowery convolutions, of a miraculous lightness and of the kind Undines dream about in their transparent palaces, hundreds of birds play, so ornamented that they seem colored with all the bright colors of opal. Ten years of the life of one of our most celebrated inlayers would not be enough to accomplish such work. One piece of ebony covered this chest of drawers, embossed with the arms of France and Florence. The crown above the escutcheon is that of a Grand-Duchesse. That detail, so highly significant, leads us to believe that those pieces were a gift of the Grand-Duke Frances II to his daughter. What sovereign today could afford to give such a proof of his tenderness?

The desk is made of a fore part with two folding doors, and a projecting shelf, upon which is the top part, also divided into two compartments and ending in a cornice of an exquisite purity of moulding. The ornamentation of that piece of furniture, where the monogrammes of Henri and Marie are repeated

upon the two standards, is more complicated than that of the queen's piece, but of a no less rare perfection. Trophies and allegories of war, terrible or grinning heads, replace the more graceful fantasy which decorates the chest of drawers. The prodigious cleverness with which the inlaying has been obtained is so marvellous in its results, that it can be said without exaggeration that it provokes comparison with the best executed hard stone mosaics.

A precious oddity gives to that desk an incomparable historical value. The scutcheon of Henri IV was torn out of one of the doors and rashly replaced by the scutcheon of the Concinis. This piece of furniture must have been given to the Maréchal d'Ancre by the Queen, after Henri IV's death. That fact alone would confirm the suppositions of historians and the gossip of the memoirs of the time.

Further proof is given by the history of the desk. After the murder of the Maréchal d'Ancre, his spoils, as everyone knows, enriched the house of Luynes, and it was in Touraine, and near the small town of Luynes, that this double archeological treasure had been discovered.

In our opinion those two priceless pieces of furniture, on which Henriette d'Angleterre, Louis XIII, and Gaston d'Orléans, had leaned, those two miracles of the art of the Sixteenth Century, which is itself a miracle, these two curiosities, poetically historical, out of a queen's chamber, out of the

palace of a great king, should have been in a national museum or a sovereign's palace, rather than in the study of a man of letters. What has become of those beautiful objects since Balzac's death? I do not know.

Greater than the hatreds of all sorts which Balzac had, without one making him ever forget the others — although at heart he was more bilious than malignant — he had a double-headed hatred for Belgium. No hour passed without swords and flames, coming lightning and thunder from his mouth, against this country, execrated and damned by him.

He had his reasons.

Balzac is without doubt the writer whom Belgium has counterfeited more than any other for thirty years. It never grew weary; it put unrelenting animosity into doing it; and sometimes madness, for there were so many counterfeiters in Belgium, of any work of his that appeared, that they often made ruinous speculations in tearing the same prey. His anger was a just anger if there ever was one. It was due to the counterfeits of César Birotteau, that he took a resolution which he had systematically avoided hitherto.

There is nothing more absurd than the position in which I caught him at *Les Jardies,* in the lower room of the pavilion. He was jumping up and down like a man possessed, behind a rampart of books of twenty different sizes. He would take one, open

it furiously, look at the title, close it noisily and put it roughly back in its place, saying: "*And yet another one! And yet another one!*"

"Come here," he cried to me, as I entered the door of the low room; "come here."

"There is no danger?"

"Guess what all these are."

"Books."

"Yes, books, but what else? . . ."

"A present for your library."

"Yes, the present is charming, generous! And France allows such depredations at her door."

"When Balzac speaks of France's interests," I said to myself, "he must mean his own; because France is himself; we know our Louis XIV the second."

"What depredations?"

"What! What depredations?"

"Yes, of course; I do not know . . ."

"Are there any other brigands besides the Belgians in the world?"

"The Germans are also rather . . ."

"Yes, the Germans also counterfeit my books. But whoever says Belgian, says German."

"That's it," I said to myself, "it is about his books."

"Don't the Italians counterfeit?"

"Yes, the Italians also."

"And the Americans?"

"Yes, yes . . . but the Belgians!!"

"Then why only the Belgians?"

"It is only a Belgian who could have played me the trick of sending me here, to *Les Jardies*, a package of books, only containing all the counterfeits made in Belgium and everywhere, of my César Birotteau. What a cutpurse's insolence! What a lazzarini's impertinence! What a Bohemian's joke! It is a vengeance. I call them thieves and riflers of books as much as I can, but it is too much like laughing in my face to send me here, to *Les Jardies*, twenty-five counterfeits of César Birotteau. And I should not avenge myself! Indeed! I won't die without having avenged myself upon those bandits. What must one do, tell me, to be a member of the Authors' Society? What must one do, tell me?"

"You should be something of a man of letters. It is not always necessary, but . . ."

"What is the entrance fee?"

"Twenty francs."

"They ought to ask twenty thousand! And then all the small fry of literature would not belong; well, let it pass, the harm is done. I want to be a member of your society."

"I am very much pleased for our society's sake."

"I want to become a member this week."

"Nothing easier, my lord."

"You'll sponsor me?"

"It will be a great honor for me, Sire."

Balzac took up a handful of the counterfeits and threw them at me.

"Don't let us joke, I want to be admitted at once to the Authors' League, in order to air some strong ideas I have about counterfeits. It is a very serious matter. Let it be as soon as possible!"

"There is a meeting next Saturday. . . ."

"I want to be admitted Saturday."

"You'll be admitted."

"Then I'll give warning to all the piraters, under whatever name they hide themselves: counterfeiters, imitators, translators, peddlers, publishers, binders, folders, printers, and all other plagiarists and thieves: woe unto you!"

It was in 1839 that Balzac asked openly to become a member of the Société des Gens de Lettres, about which, until then, he had not been very enthusiastic, because, according to him, it did not work fast enough, it did not fill the world with the report of the work it was doing, and did not dominate the government.

It was doubtless because he had appraised the society in that unbalanced and unrestrained manner that his admission hardly gathered a sufficient number of votes at the General Assembly. Forty-five votes were enough to be elected, and he got fifty-three, while many members, not so celebrated outside, had up to eighty votes.

Doubtless they were proud to see him, as soon as

he was elected, take part in the committee meetings, but, although they did not say so, his unpopularity, with a rather great part of the press whose sympathy was needed, was feared. The superior man knew quickly how to dispel those clouds. While justifying, in some measure, the apprehensions of some members, he gave the society an unaccustomed impulsion. His energy roused them from their general inertia.

Balzac brought to the society a deep knowledge, almost diabolical, of the chronic poverty of the profession; a rare and unequaled cleverness, in dealing with the aristocrats of the bookshops; an indomitable desire to limit their depredations through laws he had meditated upon the Mount Sinai of a long personal experience; and, before everything else, an admirable conviction of the dignity of the man of letters.

His words were listened to, if they were not always obeyed.

Balzac expressed himself with great power and an unending prodigality of ideas in the general assemblies, in the committee, and particularly in the commissions. It was often smoke, but the fireplace was wide, the fire strong; if nothing has been left of the beautiful discourses which poured from his heavy lips, swollen with eloquence, the archives of the society have, at least, been lucky enough to keep some of his gigantic projects, colossal, astonishing

projects because of their vast scope and the minuteness of their details.

He wrote a Literary Code which is a masterpiece of logic and of deduction, a real masterpiece because of his knowledge of the matter of which it treats. The net is made by the fingers of a netmaker well versed in the cleverness of the subtle fishes he wants to catch. Not one would escape. The only criticism one can make of that project is that it gives the authors the lion's share: this one time we must be allowed to be on the side of the lion.

This colossal piece of legislation, entirely written by him, and without any precedents in literary annals, proves, besides, through a total absence of suppressions and rewritings, that Balzac did not write his first draft with such difficulty as has been always supposed, and as he himself pretended.

Now we come to the great dispute of Balzac with the *Gazette des Écoles,* an unhealthy dispute, which occurred between the time when he proposed the literary code and the time when the Société des Gens de Lettres issued a manifest in which he took part.

The dispute between Balzac and the *Gazette* or *Journal des Écoles* — journal or gazette, what does it matter, both having disappeared, and disappeared without leaving undying regrets — was born through an article which attacked the writer's honor, an article whose violence would appear inexplicable under another political régime.

That paper was publishing, for the pleasure of its readers in the Rue Saint-Jacques and the Place du Panthéon, lithographs, which it classified under a legend rather difficult to read. The drawing of which Balzac complained showed him in a cell at Clichy, dressed in a monk's robe, and seated at a table upon which were two bottles of wine and a champagne glass. In his left hand he held a pipe — Balzac a pipe! — which he was smoking, and with his right arm he encircled the waist of a young woman; young, of course, but very much too ugly to pardon in any way the one to whom the lithographer attributed this lying trifling. Under this awful debauch of a stupid pencil, were four lines, impossible to render in a language understandable by decent people. After having washed it twice in whitewash, here is what is left, four lines reduced to two by chemistry: "Le révérend père Séraphitus mysticus Goriot, de l'ordre régulier des frères de Clichy, mis dedans par tous ceux qu'il y a mis, reçoit dans sa solitude forcée les consolations de Santa Séraphita. Scènes de la vie cachée, pour faire suite à celles de la vie privée."

How did Balzac hear of that insult, he who was travelling so often, and so often away in the country? Probably a charitable friend, too charitable, had sent him — charming attention — the number containing it. It is always in that manner that things reach their destination. If, upon the envelope of

each letter one writes, — note this with sorrow — something offensive to the addressee were written, not one letter would be lost in France!

It was through Balzac himself that I learned at the same time of the existence of the article and the existence of the paper. It will be seen later, why I remember so exactly to this day the smallest details of that ugly affair, which Balzac remembered with plans of vengeance so sweeping that they would relegate the Borgias to the lower class of vindictive souls. It is true that the press in France had never gone as impertinently and as far in personalities. It was a new pleasure. It was then called the *American* School, as in painting one calls certain ways of painting energetically or brilliantly, the Michael-Angelo School, or the Titian School. The American School was doing well, very well! Beautiful style, beautiful color; murders à la Rubens!

It was toward the end of August, 1839. I had left the Place Saint-Georges to go to the Rue Bréda, was just entering that awful square which is also called Bréda, and which always seems to have convulsions and nausea, when I saw Balzac coming down the street, accompanied by another man, but a strange Balzac, as red as a bell-ringer on Shrove Tuesday, his cheeks wet with perspiration, and his clothes covered with white dust. His companion was a man as fat as he, but much less tall, thick-set, with a good corporation, dressed in grey from top to toe,

HONORÉ DE BALZAC (Caricature by an unknown artist)

with a wide white hat, and grey shoes with white spats. I thought I was seeing two fishes rolled in white flour.

The August sun was beating on the Place Bréda, and gave it a marble tint like Montmartre which harmonized perfectly with the whitish personages in the picture. Balzac did not see me, so engrossed was he in his conversation, or rather his monologue, because at first I heard only him; and he, Balzac was saying at least twenty times the name of the man who was walking beside him. "No, no! Monsieur Jacquin. — You are not at all reasonable, Monsieur Jacquin. — It is quite impossible, Monsieur Jacquin! — You would not, Monsieur Jacquin! — You'll have to come down considerably, Monsieur Jacquin. — But Monsieur Jacquin! Monsieur Jacquin! Where would you lead me if I let you! — Not that, Monsieur Jacquin!"

Running the risk of crushing a dozen Monsieur Jacquins, I interrupted Balzac with my bow and my presence.

"Ah, I was going to your place!" he said, taking my arm quickly, without releasing Monsieur Jacquin's; "this letter is for you" — he took out a letter from his pocket — "in case I should not have met you. Do you know what has happened to me?"

"No, I don't."

Balzac was almost annoyed with my answer; he

thought that already all Paris knew what he was going to tell me.

"What's happened?"

Before answering me, Balzac went on with M. Jacquin: "Look here, dear Père Jacquin, my good little Père Jacquin, you'll put in your bill — I know what I am talking about: Removal of debris, gravel due to digging and wrecking."

"Yes, Monsieur de Balzac."

"You'll put down on my account forty loads with one horse, sixty francs."

"Yes, Monsieur de Balzac."

"Well, Père Jacquin, that's what I won't tolerate."

"Thirty sous the load with one horse, that's sixty francs, Monsieur de Balzac, sixty francs."

"Of course!"

"Well, then?"

"But I won't pay you thirty sous a load, you joker, never! That's why it is not sixty francs."

Then I understood that Père Jacquin was a mason who worked for Balzac at *Les Jardies*, and I learned later that M. Jacquin and he had come out from the warehouse of one of those numerous wholesale dealers in plaster all along the barriers at the foot of the Butte Montmartre, the source of their commerce and riches.

Leaving suddenly the thread of his conversation with M. Jacquin, Balzac said to me, as he took

out of his pocket a number of the *Gazette des Écoles:*

"Look, look at that, I'll avenge myself!"

He opened the rather shady looking paper, and went on:

"Does it not seem infamous to you?"

"I tell you, Monsieur de Balzac, that's the price, the lowest price."

"What a country! What a country! Where such abominations are allowed!"

"Pay my bill, if you do not believe me."

"Who is speaking of your bill? Who worries about your bill?"

Père Jacquin became magnificent with stupidity.

"Yes, it is rather hard," I said to Balzac, "as it is evidently you they have tried to do. They might have made a better resemblance."

"That M. de Balzac!" Père Jacquin interrupted without permission. "Let us see! M. de Balzac does not dress like a monk, M. de Balzac does not smoke, M. de Balzac . . ."

"Those aren't things you understand anything about, Père Jacquin."

"Well, then, I shall tell you about the removal of the debris, it is not one cent less. Think, in this kind of weather it is frightfully hard on the horses; they melt upon their fetlock-joints."

"It is hard!" cried de Balzac coming back suddenly to the gravel and the debris taken away, "it

is hard to go to the river which is a few stone's throws from *Les Jardies!*"

"A few stone's throws, a few stone's throws. . . . It pleases you to say so, Monsieur de Balzac."

"I'll give you twenty sous a load: forty loads, forty francs, Monsieur Jacquin."

"It is not possible, Monsieur de Balzac."

"The Committee of the Société des Gens de Lettres owes to its dignity the fighting of this case," Balzac went on, leaving M. Jacquin in the midst of his gravel; "I shall acquaint the Committee with my demands, they'll address a request to the king's proctor, and the honor of literature will be avenged. It is necessary!"

"Think first," I said to Balzac, "think."

"I have done my thinking! What pity should one have for such scoundrels?"

"I am not thinking about them, I am thinking about you."

"Perhaps you think I am not wounded enough in my personal pride?"

"That's not the question."

"That's the whole question."

"Aren't you going to make known, by so much publicity, what no one knows?"

"Everyone knows it!"

And Balzac slapped Père Jacquin's shoulder vigorously, covering us with a cloud of plaster.

"Ah! that's where I don't agree with you," I went on.

Jacquin began dusting himself quietly.

"Then you don't believe in my great notoriety?"

"I believe in it as much as you like, but it is no reason why I should advise you to do a foolish thing."

"A foolish thing! You call a foolish thing just punishment inflicted upon such scoundrels, horrible bandits who make a mockery of my reputation as a man and as a writer?"

A new slap upon Jacquin's shoulder, a new cloud of rising dust.

"But if you sue them, you will, firstly, make known the existence of the paper; a lawsuit gives it a pedestal; a lawsuit will be worth five hundred subscribers to it."

Jacquin dusted himself again with the same calm, the calm of the dog which licks itself after a kick from its master.

"That lawsuit will condemn it to prison and infamy," replied Balzac.

"That's not quite sure; the laws do not protect one so well in such matters. It is not at all sure."

"Ah! there you are," he said, "I recognize in you the journalist: one can never touch journalism's delicate skin in your presence. Go on: what is bred in the bone will never be got out of the flesh; once a journalist, always a journalist. All these cut-

throats of the press, little and big, are your colleagues."

"You are going too far . . . All, no! I have no reason to be so thankful to them myself . . . You are going much too far."

"No . . . I know you, I say, the king might make you a peer of France, a peer of France, do you hear, — but you would still get up at night to do some newspaper story against someone or something, against the king himself even, though he made you a peer of France!"

"Please leave me out of this. What do you want?"

"I told you, a famous lawsuit!"

A third terrible slap upon Jacquin's back, who this time disappeared in the dust.

"Pardon," said Père Jacquin, behind the curtain of dust which rendered him invisible for the time being, "pardon, Monsieur de Balzac; what were we saying in the end?"

"In the end, we were saying," answered Balzac, "twenty sous a load."

"Thirty! Monsieur de Balzac."

"Twenty! Père Jacquin."

"Thirty! Monsieur de Balzac."

"Please give him twenty-five per load, or this argument will never end," I said to Balzac.

I thought Balzac was going to eat me.

"Twenty-five sous! Never! How you go on! You

don't know Père Jacquin, he is a scoundrel, a thief; he is counting upon his importunity, he is counting upon my fatigue; he is counting upon all the bad sentiments to rob me from head to foot."

"Ah! Monsieur de Balzac, it amuses you to say so."

"As far as gravel is concerned, he is a journalist," went on Balzac. "Look here, Père Jacquin, let us speak the truth to each other; you don't even fill half your carts when you take away the debris and gravel, so that forty loads are twenty loads, and yet! and yet! I bet there would be room for fat Madame Jacquin in the cart, when you say it is full, if she wanted to get in. Consequently, when I am paying for forty loads, I am shutting my eyes."

"Heavens no! They are far too open. Once, twice, and to please Monsieur," said Jacquin, looking at me, "it will be twenty-three sous."

"We'll see about that tomorrow," answered Balzac, "but I don't promise anything. Twenty-three sous!"

"Will you come down there?"

"Yes, I'll see where they're digging, and I'll examine the carts."

"It is your right, Monsieur de Balzac, you'll evaluate. Good-bye then, till tomorrow!"

"Till tomorrow, Père Jacquin, at seven, the first loading."

"Yes, at dawn! Monsieur de Balzac!"

Père Jacquin went away and Balzac and I went towards the boulevard.

The conclusion of our interview was this: He was to write to me that evening a letter with his complaint about the *Journal des Écoles:* I was to read it the next day to the Committee; the Committee was to take afterwards whatever action it saw fit to vindicate the injured interests of one of its members.

The next day, indeed, I read to the Committee a letter Balzac had written to me the evening before, as we had decided.

It will be seen, from the minutes of the session, what were the results of my move in favor of Balzac.

Here are the minutes: "M. Léon Gozlan read a letter written to him by M. de Balzac, in which he complained of the publication of an illustration done by the *Gazette des Écoles,* with a text containing outrageous and defamatory matter. M. de Balzac asks for the intervention of the Committee with the King's Proctor in Paris.

"The Committee, after deliberating, decided that such a move would be preceded by a visit to the managing editor of *Les Écoles,* by two of its members, to obtain amicably the apologies due M. de Balzac; and, in case that approach was unsuccessful, M. de Balzac would be advised of it by letter, and he could pursue the matter as he saw fit."

Messieurs Cauchois Lemaire and David are

named to approach the managing editor of the *Journal des Écoles.*

The mission of the two members of the Committee to the *Journal des Écoles* was so far from being successful, that the Committee wrote the following letter to the King's Proctor:

Paris, August 31st, 1839

To M. the King's Proctor of the Civil lower court of the Seine

Sir,

"The Committee of the Société des Gens de Lettres, whose duty it is to protect the honor of every one of its members much more than their interest, is obliged, on account of the excessive gravity of the case, to call your attention to the calumnious statements uttered beneath the enclosed drawing published in No. 40 of the *Journal des Écoles.* Besides the coarse resemblance of this drawing to M. de Balzac, the inscription underneath indicates him too clearly for anyone to doubt the defamatory purpose of the author. We call respectfully to your attention, that independently of its obscene and injurious character, the text contains a calumny, in insinuating that M. de Balzac was put in prison for debt. M. de Balzac is injured thus in his honor and in his interests. Consequently, we beg you to deliver to the tribunal, the authors and accomplices of the outrage."

"We have the honor to be, most respectfully, Sir, etc. . . ."

The signatures of the members of the Committee followed.

For this document to be legal, Balzac had to make a complaint himself, which he did. Here is the text of his complaint.

Paris, September 1st, 1839

To the King's Proctor in his court

Sir,

"I know that the Committee of the Société des Gens de Lettres has brought to your attention, a case of grave defamation committed against me, in sending you the proofs of the outrage, but, as that would not be sufficient for you to act, I have the honor to become plaintiff before your court. M. Benazet, lawyer of the Society, will be authorized and will take the necessary steps.

"I have the honor, Sir, to be your most obedient servant,

"de Balzac."

Neither his letter, which I am copying from the original, nor the Committee's, which is also copied from the original, were sent to the court of the King's Proctor, who, consequently, never knew anything of the affair. Balzac asked for a few days be-

fore he decided to take such a step; he spent them I don't remember where; weeks went by; his common sense came back; and he ended where he ought to have begun, if he had followed my advice — that is to say, he did nothing at all. The affair disappeared in the deepest abyss of the ocean of forgetfulness, an abyss quite worthy of being called pacific.

Did that dear M. Jacquin get twenty-three sous a load, for his wrecking and his gravel? I can't say, for my ignorance on that score is complete.

PART THREE

PART THREE

VAUTRIN'S failure had not discouraged Balzac; two years after the riot of the famous performance of that comedy, he was knocking at the doors of the Odéon, whose director then was M. Auguste Lireux. It would show small knowledge of Lireux's venturesome mind, so literary too, to doubt his willingness, we might almost say, his eagerness, to place himself at the disposal of Balzac, who, for the second time and with the same ardour, was attempting fortune in the theatre. The spirit suited those two daring people of the same ilk. The latter was always looking for an America with gold mines; the former came to him saying: "I am bringing it in the pages of my manuscript." What a welcome! What joy! "Enter," said the director, "I was waiting for you"; "enter," said the theatre, "you were expected"; "enter," said the actors lined up in the peristyle, "we were watching for you"; "enter," said the cashier, "I had given you up!" It is very rare to see a theatrical administration giving such a welcome to a dramatic author, especially after a

failure; but *Vautrin's* failure had created so much noise, that it was like a success, it was hardly distinguishable from a success. It is because in Paris, note this very important point, it is not necessary to know what the noise is about; there is no time to find out. Did you make a noise? — Yes. — You succeeded. — But . . . — You succeeded. — And yet . . . — You succeeded.

From the peristyle to the greenroom Balzac's way was saluted with smiles, compliments, welcomes, congratulations. Bouquets would have been thrown at him if the administration had provided them.

At the Odéon, it was in the greenroom that the plays were read, either to be received by the Committee, or, when they had been accepted, to get the actors acquainted with their parts; at that time it did not have the affected air of a provincial museum, or a sale of paintings for the benefit of blind youths; its setting of green cloth was austere; no pictures, no furniture, except a long table, heavy armchairs, and a silly clock, with a sphere on top around which the gold hand sometimes indicated the time.

It is to this greenroom that Balzac went one winter's day, to read the *Ressources de Quinola,* a comedy in five acts. The assembly was numerous; it was unusual on account of Madame Dorval's presence. The celebrated actress was there less through duty as a member of the Odéon than through curiosity; she was not supposed to have a

part in Balzac's play. However, they were hoping that she might play in it; and she very much desired that she should. Perhaps in the reading some dramatic situation could be discovered which would have escaped the inexperience of the author: there might be an opportunity to develop a character for him; from that to having a beautiful part was only a step. Whatever the motive was, Madame Dorval was present at the reading of Quinola. I was seated beside her, at the angle of the huge mantelpiece. Balzac was at the head of the long green table, on the Luxembourg side. He wanted to read standing, as he read all his plays, even *Mercadet*, and that reminds me that the actors of the Comédie-Française were a little surprised by this defection from the armchair, the Alexandrine armchair: born the same day as the glass of sugared water, to die at the same time.

Quinola's reading began.

Heavy at first, embarrassed, thick, Balzac's voice cleared as he went on; it acquired later a grave, perfect, velvety tone, and at last, when he was in his stride and his passion entered into the course of the drama, it obeyed the most delicate intentions of the words, the most fugitive nuances of the dialogue. It was good, almost as good as theatre, sometimes even better, because it was less stilted and consequently more human. He read with great conviction; he let himself go, he made us cry, he made

us laugh, crying and laughing himself without being restrained for an instant by his shyness. In laughing particularly he won us and carried us away; he harnessed us, so to speak, to his hearty laughter with four wheels, and willy-nilly, we had to follow him, even if we had to deduct afterwards from the work's value, the part due to the reader.

Balzac read admirably well the four first acts of the *Ressources de Quinola*. If his readers did not feel themselves on a well-sanded and straight road, and it was far from it, they were pleased to run through this forest of intrigues and events, planted and cut in Spanish fashion. Happy in forgetting for the moment the servitude and chains of our theatre, which is a real prison, they were charmed by all the air and space accorded by the author. He went very far in passion, very far in comedy, much further still in his manner of treating conventions. The slaves of rules abandoned themselves with joy to this complete and frank license! They were so far from the actual performances that no one at that moment thought of them, that is to say, of their danger. And wasn't it a real performance?

Suddenly joy, pleasure, gaiety, happiness, stopped and stopped sharply: like a carriage whose wheel is broken. — What was happening? What on earth was happening? Balzac, at the end of the fourth act, after blowing his nose, drying his face and head, and looking under his wide white waistcoat and ad-

justing his braces to pull up his trousers, which had started to come down during his violent exercise, it happened, Balzac was announcing to his very eager listeners, that the fifth act was not written. — The fifth act was not written! — The fifth act was not written! What a surprise! What a disillusionment! So many sad faces suddenly! It was impossible! — Nothing was truer. — Balzac had not written his fifth act yet. Balzac had knocked jauntily at the door of the Odéon to read the first four acts of the *Ressources de Quinola.*

Silence reigned.

"I am going to tell the fifth act," Balzac went on, without considering more seriously the disadvantages of his not having written it.

The actors looked at each other with new surprise: "Tell a fifth act!" — Unheard of!

Madame Dorval, very unusual herself, was not the least astonished; and while Balzac was getting ready to tell his fifth act, she bent towards me, and winking with her beautiful clever eyes, so blue and so expressive, and softening her voice to the tone of confidences, she said:

"Well, my dear friend, who is this man?"

"He is Balzac, the illustrious Balzac."

"Of course, I know, but is he mocking us? To tell a fifth act, decidedly he is making fun of us."

"No indeed, he is not."

"And yet . . ."

"He is Balzac. Accept him as he is."

"Is he always like that?"

"Always."

"When he gives a manuscript to the printers, does he always give only half?"

"If he gave them half! He gives them often less than nothing, because not one line remains of his original writings."

"Why, he must be mad?"

"Now you are asking another question."

"What are we going to do without the fifth act? . . . Will he do it?"

"Probably."

"But when?"

"Perhaps this evening; perhaps ten years from now; perhaps never, if another subject happens to please him better."

But Balzac, while rolling up his manuscript and tying it with a small piece of twine he had sought in each one of his pockets, then under the table, and which he had finally found in his hat, had gathered all the loose threads in his mind and was starting the tale of his fifth act.

That fifth act was very short, although it was not as short as it became later in the theatre; however, it consisted of only eight or ten short scenes. But eight or ten scenes to expound, eight or ten scenes of a fifth act, where all the threads converge and unite, was not an ordinary *tour de force*. It was not

BALZAC—DANTON'S COMIC STATUE

enough to have imagination and eloquence; besides it was perfectly useless at that fatal point in the action; at that point, great common sense, straight and unbending logic were necessary to reach without deviation the end with which nothing must interfere, without running the risk of failure.

Balzac was not the man to do such acrobatics upon the tight rope. He lost his balance in the midst of the Grand Inquisiteur, Don Frégose, Fontanarès, Faustine, Don Ramon, Matthieu Magis, the host of the Soleil d'Or, Coppolus, Carpano, Esteban, Gironne, and Quinola. Improvisation was not favorable to him: it must be said that he was tired from the reading of the preceding acts. In one instant he lost more than half the ground he had won in the minds of his audience, as mobile minded as actors usually are, feeling keenly, exaggerating their impressions because they are keenly sensitive. I had under my eyes, on a smaller scale, the upset I witnessed two months later in the gaslight of the Odéon, on the day of the first performance of the *Ressources de Quinola*. Many of the bad impressions conceived following this unlucky improvisation disappeared as they went through the mill of rehearsals, but a real and irreparable harm was the result. Madame Dorval declared before leaving the greenroom, that she saw no part in the play for her, a play which she recognized as full of literary beauty and of fine and true observations. Having said that,

she tied the ribbons of her hat with her usual vivacity, gave two sharp pats to the sides of her dress, all crushed by the long séance, tucked her always animated hands into her muff of grey fox, saluted us and went out.

Two minutes after Madame Dorval's exit there was no one in the greenroom, except Balzac and myself.

A veiled lady, and so deeply veiled that no one could see her features — and I don't need to say that curiosity was excited — had entered the greenroom of the Odéon a little before the actors' arrival; she had been present without changing her seat, without the slightest movement, at the reading of *Quinola,* and she had gone between Madame Dorval's departure and the general exit of the actors.

It is to that veiled lady that Balzac, without saying a single word, gave the manuscript of his comedy, when she got up as we all did to leave the greenroom, where her presence — need I repeat it? — had not failed to rouse a great deal of attention.

Coming out of that hot session, Balzac and I went to breathe in the Jardin du Luxembourg.

The belief will be, of course, that Balzac, his mind still swayed by all the conflicting currents of the afternoon, spoke to me about the reading of his *Quinola,* asked me questions about the impression it had made, about what I had heard said around me, about the small or great merit of his work.

Balzac did not ask me a single question which had to do, either closely or remotely, with the incidents of the reading. He had stopped thinking of it already. We reached the terrace which is close to the Rue de l'Enfer, and from where one views the stiff compartments of the gardens of le Nôtre, and there he spoke to me of the changes he had proposed that M. Decases make in his palace. Amongst other innovations he spoke of a winding staircase which would start from the centre of the Jardin du Luxembourg, and from which one could go to the Catacombes, which stretch, as everyone knows, under a great part of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and Faubourg Saint-Marceau. Through that crooked staircase, whose entrance would be monumental, one would reach the Parisian necropolis. Part of it only would be used, and that part would be enclosed between walls of black granite and would be lighted with antique lanterns. He could not understand why the municipal authorities should waste this real attraction, which they had in their hands, or rather under their feet, so to speak, to satisfy the curiosity of foreigners who always talk about the Catacombes of Paris. " Do that," I said to Balzac, " and tomorrow you'll have speculators who will sell beer and open public balls in the Catacombes. You'll see placarded upon the walls of Paris: *Sunday, great Fête in honour of Students at the Chaumière des Catacombes.*"

The night had come; it was cold and wet in the Jardin du Luxembourg; we left it to go and dine at the Restaurant Risbeck, where the Director of the Odéon had promised to join Balzac later in the evening. The question of distributing parts was going to be thrashed out, an important question! as well as many others which had to do with starting work on *Quinola.*

About the end of the dinner, the Director of the Odéon, as he had promised, came to the private room where we were and, even before he sat down, told Balzac about the extraordinary enthusiasm with which the *Ressources de Quinola* had been received by the actors of the Odéon. He himself recognized, even more than the others, in that work, the qualities of a comedy of superior merit. Neglecting to make his statements more precise, he plunged generously into a whirl of noisy sentences in the midst of which appeared, like so many electrical sparks, these words: "Spanish genius! Real Spanish genre, Calderon! . . . Lope de Vega! . . . Great fantasy! . . . Success! . . . One hundred performances! Subsidy . . . double subsidy! . . . Triple success . . . Twenty days hence the curtain will rise gloriously for that masterpiece."

"Excuse me, Monsieur Lireux," said Balzac, stopping the Pindaric flight of the impetuous and witty director in its ascent, "then you are going to

put my play into rehearsal soon, when you speak of presenting it in twenty days? "

"Of course, and not later than tomorrow; tonight if I could."

"Even before the fifth act is written? "

"How modest you are! "

"What do you mean? "

"Is not your genius guarantee enough for that act and its merit? Let us talk about the actors I want to offer you for your play."

"Offer, Monsieur Lireux, offer."

It was the ticklish spot: the Mont Blanc to cross!

"I won't tell you that they are eagles. — No! but the beauty and suaveness of the ensemble will make up for the insufficiency of the details. And, of course, if there are no bad parts for a good actor, there are no bad actors with good parts, and all your parts are beautiful, Monsieur de Balzac."

After that paradoxical praise had been given to his company, M. Lireux made Balzac accept the artists he thought most capable of acting his comedy. They were a little divided about the assignment of the part of Faustina, which Balzac would have liked to give to Madame Dorval, but at last Mademoiselle Héléna Gaussin was accepted, instead of the great actress, too great, the clever director of the Odéon pretended, not to make one expect from the part dramatic effects which had not been placed in it, by the wise and marvellous mind of the author.

"It would have been dangerous," he added, "to let the public hope for what no human endeavour could accomplish, if Madame Dorval had covered the bill with the shining brightness of her name. Great names engage one. How is one to keep such an engagement? And besides," added Lireux, modifying his vibrant tone, "queenly bearing, nobility, a great deal of nobility, are necessary, you understand that better than anyone, Monsieur de Balzac, to play the part of Faustina Brancadori. Brancadori! What an exacting name! And, between ourselves, Madame Dorval, as an actress, was not born upon the steps of a throne; she renders well, without any doubt, the real, bourgeois feelings, the commonplace ones, but when it is a question of speaking like a queen, sceptre in hand . . . no! . . . Mademoiselle Héléna Gaussin is the actress needed for the part; we can't get out of that. The most beautiful shoulders in Paris!"

"She is not very well known."

"Possibly not in France, but in Switzerland! Go through Switzerland, and you'll see."

"She comes from Switzerland?"

"Yes. It almost required an extradition law to make her come to France. Her Swiss admirers had leagued themselves together to prevent her from going over the frontier. Judge what a talent she has!"

Balzac was winking at me, from time to time, as

if to say: "He is deceiving me." Lireux also winked to say: "Will I succeed in deceiving him?" Neither one nor the other was duped by that comedy before the comedy. A Genoese and a Corsican were holding the cards.

"Besides," Lireux went on, "I shall cover your actress with the most gorgeous stuffs I can find in liquidating shops. There will never have been an actress damasked and *capitonnée* as she."

The dialogue went on for a long time with such jokes, inseparable from the most serious reasoning of the young director of the Odéon; but, as I said before, Balzac accepted Madame Héléna Gaussin for the part of Faustina Brancadori in the *Ressources de Quinola.*

"Now," M. Lireux went on, "now that we agree about the choice of actors, let us settle the day for the rehearsals. Shall we begin tomorrow?"

"All right, tomorrow," Balzac answered.

"Where shall I send the notices?"

Balzac was not expecting that question, which naturally obliged him to tell the name of the street and the number of the house where he lived. His answer was not forthcoming.

"Send the notices," I said, "to the Rue . . ."

"One moment," Balzac interrupted me roughly, "one moment."

I saw my mistake. Balzac did not approve of my

revealing, even in the unavoidable circumstance that had arisen, the place where he lived. I remained silent.

The Director of the Odéon, whose mind was much keener than mine, had already gauged Balzac's embarrassment, and was smiling behind his twinkling glasses and waiting.

"Let us see," he said to Balzac, "you don't want the notices of rehearsal to be taken to you by a messenger from the theatre?"

"No . . . and I am thinking of some means . . ."

"Would you consent to my sending them to you by post?"

"Yes . . . by post . . . but it would give you a lot of trouble . . . if there were any other means . . ."

"I would be the only one to know your place of residence . . . but, I see," said Lireux, while drying the lenses of his glasses with a corner of the tablecloth, "that way is not quite to your taste; let us think of another . . . if there are any others," murmured Lireux.

I permitted myself to say: "If we could teach a bird to leave Balzac's house every morning, go to the concierge of the Odéon and take from the concierge the notice it would bring back in its beak, that would, I think, overcome the difficulty. Only we must find the bird."

"That's exactly like you!" said Balzac, "joking about the most serious matters in life."

Lireux went on cleaning his glasses.

"Is it not possible to go to rehearsals without notice?" asked Balzac, more and more determined not to give his address.

"It is impracticable! We rehearse one day, and not the other; the day before, the rehearsal may be fixed for eleven, and then changed to noon. You'll lose your time in useless journeyings."

"Well!" said Balzac, sighing, "well, I shall have to do it. I have found a way to receive your notices."

"And that is?" said Lireux, quickly replacing his glasses.

"Have you an intelligent messenger boy?"

"He is an ex-commercial guard."

"The devil! Too intelligent!"

"I am joking," Lireux went on, "he is an employe I can count upon."

"That word *count,*" cried Balzac laughing, but laughing so that all the buttons of his waistcoat, always badly sewed, gave way, "that word *count* occurs here very appropriately."

"Why?" I asked Balzac.

"Because . . . this employe upon whom you can *count,* does he know how to count?" Balzac asked Lireux.

"Yes, of course."

"Here is what will have to be done. Please listen to me. He'll go to the Champs-Elysées every morning with my rehearsal notice."

"To the Champs-Elysées?" Lireux repeated.

"When he reaches the Rond-point of the Fountain . . ."

"Very well! the Rond-point of the Fountain," repeated Lireux.

"He'll go," went on Balzac, "towards the Arc de l'Étoile, and at the twentieth tree on the left he'll see a man who will seem to be looking for a blackbird in the trees."

"A blackbird?" cried Lireux.

"A blackbird or some other bird."

"Now you talk about birds too!"

"Please let me finish. Your messenger from the theatre will approach this man and say to him: 'I have it!' That man will answer: 'Since you have it, what are you waiting for?' Hearing this answer your messenger will give him the notice of rehearsal and he'll go away without looking back of him. The rest is my own affair."

Lireux saw no objection to that strange way of sending and receiving rehearsal notices. "I am dealing with Ferragus, the dramatist." He confined himself to saying to Balzac: "It is well understood, however, dear Monsieur de Balzac, that if in the night a thunderbolt destroys the twentieth tree on the Champs-Elysées, after the fountain, it is

at the twenty-first one that your man will expect mine?"

Things were thus arranged for the sending of the rehearsal notices for *Quinola:* but it is probable that later a method less eccentric and a little more in harmony with the traditions of the theatre was adopted.

When that incident was closed, as they say at the bar, Balzac, more at ease to treat the other questions which had to do with his interests, went on thus:

"You don't suppose, dear Monsieur Lireux, that I approach the theatre again, only to follow meanly the beaten paths of the past; I want to innovate in every way and in everything."

"That's what I understand," answered Lireux, "and you see in me one who won't remain behind when you go forward."

Balzac then said:

"First chapter of the reforms I bring. I don't want any claque. I hated it at *Vautrin,* and I put up with it to please the blind routine of Harel, tied by a thousand ties of friendship and a lot of contracts with Porcher — but I banish them from *Quinola* and for life."

"And yet the orchestra of the Odéon, noisy nursery of students, needs an intelligent lightning rod to rise in the midst of storms and to warn off thunderbolts or to direct them. That lightning rod . . ."

"I see your point: that lightning rod is the claque."

"But . . ."

"I know the comparison; it pleases me even in its second edition; but at the first performance of my plays, I declare solemnly I won't have any claque. Take it or leave it. *Quinola* is to be done on that condition."

"Since that is the case," Lireux went on, readjusting his glasses, "since you speak to me with such resolute conviction, no consideration stands in my way. Frankness for frankness. My indignation is stirred by yours! Yes, you are right, Monsieur de Balzac; the claque is the leprosy of the theatre, the shameful sickness which men like you should not palliate, but should do away with. It is well done. Only an honest and courageous soul would attempt such a thing; a soul . . ."

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur de Lireux," Balzac interrupted in a tone of voice which indicated he had detected a comic note coming through the metallic vocal cords of the charming director of the second Théâtre-Français; "excuse me, Monsieur de Lireux, I do not ask for the expulsion of the claque because it seems to me to be an immoral institution, as it does to you, but simply because it occupies seats in the parterre and the seats it occupies do not bring in any money."

"Ah! all right," said Lireux whose indignation

went back to the hilt in the scabbard from which he had taken it too soon. "Very well! Very well! I misunderstood; it is a question of money for you, a pure question of money."

"A question of money! What are we discussing here? Business."

"Business, of course."

"Then, Monsieur Lireux, let us talk business."

"I am listening, Monsieur de Balzac." What a man! the two mysterious lenses of Lireux's glasses were saying; what a man!

"First, and it is right that you should be warned, I want the whole theatre for the three first performances of *Quinola.*"

"He is doing exactly as for *Vautrin,*" I said sotto voce to Lireux.

"I fear so," Lireux answered in the same way, and then to Balzac, "But what shall I get?"

"Half of the profits, which will be enormous, unheard of!"

Lireux was thinking.

"I accept that condition," he said, after a few seconds.

"Now, let us discuss details."

"Let us discuss the details."

The waiter brought more candles; the night was quite advanced.

"Tell me about the seats according to their special and technical qualifications," Balzac went on,

" and I will tell you as you go along the people who shall have them from me according to my rights as sole manager of the seating."

" You'll give them, I hope," said Lireux, in his turn, " to the people who pay for their tickets at the door."

" There won't be any door! " Balzac replied, with a gesture in the manner of Frédérick Lemaître, whose mimicry he had copied for a long time.

" What? There won't be any door? "

Lireux did not know what it all meant.

" I mean that the tickets will be bought from me, and not, as is generally done, at the ticket office. It will be open for form's sake, but that's all. So don't flounder in those useless details. Please tell me, as I have asked you to do, tell me the scale of the seats. I'll tell you in a minute why I ask you to have the kindness to do so."

" The parterre! " said Lireux.

" All right, you understand. — Well, in the parterre, I want Knights of Saint-Louis only. Make a note of that."

His astonishment was worth seeing.

" What did you say? " Lireux, transfigured, made him repeat.

" I said, I want in the parterre Knights of Saint-Louis only, at the first performance of *Quinola*."

" Knights of Saint-Louis! " Lireux repeated.

"And killed," I added, "at the siege of Malta in 1712."

Lireux spoiled my joke immediately with dignified and sincere words of approbation: at last he had measured his man.

"In the parterre, at your first performance, Monsieur de Balzac, there will be Knights of Saint-Louis only, but you must assume the responsibility of finding them."

"I do. Please go on telling me about the seats."

"Orchestra!" said Lireux.

"In the orchestra, the peers of France. I want in the orchestra, peers only."

"But the orchestra, Monsieur de Balzac, won't be big enough for all of them."

"They'll stand in the passages."

"First-tier boxes! . . ."

"The court in the first-tier boxes."

"First ranks of the balcony," Lireux went on.

"The ambassadors and the plenipotentiary ministers of the first ranks of the balcony," said Balzac.

Lireux went on with his enumeration.

"Open boxes of the first balcony!"

"There, the wives of ambassadors."

"Second balcony!" cried Lireux.

"Deputies and high functionaries of State in the second balcony," replied Balzac.

"Third balcony!"

"Financiers of importance."

"Fourth balcony!"

"The rich and choice bourgeois," Balzac announced.

"Yes, but the journalists," asked Lireux, "where will you put them."

"They'll pay for their seats . . . if there are any left; and none will be left."

"I am afraid that if you neglect to send to the journalists the boxes they have occupied from time immemorial . . . ," stammered Lireux.

"Once again, I beg your pardon, Monsieur Lireux, but I have finished with journalists for all time; there exists a state of savage war between us; they want my scalp in the manner of the Mohicans, and I want to drink in their cranium in the manner of the Muscoculges."

Lireux dispensed with the journalists.

The contract was ratified about midnight by the two parties: the three first performances would be Balzac's property, and he would also have the right to sell to whom he chose and at what price he liked the thousand or twelve hundred seats which at that time comprised the seating capacity of the beautiful but dull Odéon.

A few days after that dinner at Risbeck, the rehearsals of *Quinola* began, preparatory work at which Balzac was present regularly, less to teach the actors how he wanted to be interpreted than to

rewrite, today a phrase, tomorrow a scene, the next day a whole act; work which he complicated still more by carrying his innumerable corrections and modifications, not only, as we all do, on the author's manuscript, but on the prompter's, and even on the printed play. An explanation seems indispensable here. Balzac always had his dramatic works printed before the performance, perhaps because in that way he could strike a better bargain with the publisher, or perhaps, and this is more probable, because he could only see the faults and imperfections of his work when printed.

We must readily admit that the treble business of author, corrector, and director of rehearsals made it impossible for him to be careful about the setting. He perspired and rushed about busily without ever concentrating his attention on rehearsals. If to that perpetual agitation of body and of mind, you add the exceptional and much greater trouble he put upon himself by pretending to place unaided a thousand or twelve hundred seats, you may reach an approximate idea — and then it will frighten you — of Balzac as a dramatist, of Balzac, author of the *Ressources de Quinola.*

It is time to recall the peculiarities, already touched upon in the chapter on *Vautrin's* performance, which marked the famous sale of tickets before the performance of *Quinola* and on the day itself.

Not only was Balzac the lessee and dispenser of the tickets, but he did not hesitate at the thought of speculating in them; and that not through greed, but through eccentricity, and above all to obey the proud need he felt of doing without an intermediary, of crushing under his feet the men eternally placed between the producer and the buyer, an honorable but dangerous feeling.

If someone came to buy a box in the first balcony, from behind the wicket in the ticket office he would answer: "Too late! Too late! the last was sold to the Princess Augustina-Augustini of Modena." — "But, Monsieur de Balzac, we are ready to pay any price . . ." — "Were the price still madder, you could not get a first tier box for there are none." And the prospective purchaser would go away without the box. That game succeeded on the first days of the sale of tickets: people are willing to pay very dear for seats when they are very difficult to buy. But on the following days desire calmed down, as everything calms down in this world; people grew tired, and Balzac, during the week preceding the first performance, was very glad to sell, at the regular price, seats he had first dreamed of selling at fabulous prices, exaggerated in his magnificent imagination.

In that furious entanglement of seats sold, resold, promised or left, under which Balzac's pretensions were slowly crushed, what became of the Knights

of Saint-Louis, the peers of France, the great financiers and the best of the bourgeoisie? If we look for them, perhaps we shall find them at the first performance of the *Ressources de Quinola.*

Some hours before that first performance, the day before that great event, Balzac, giving up his seemingly set purpose and forgetting his furious hatred of the claque, wanted, asked for, demanded the claque at any price. What had happened to his head? Luckily Lireux never lost his.

Upon this desire in extremis of Balzac, weak at the last, the director of the Odéon called the chief of the claque into his office, and communicated the better-advised author's intentions. In receiving this communication, M. Dupont (it was the name of that strange chief) haughtily received it from the monumental height of his self-esteem, hurt by Balzac, so disdainful at first of his importance and of his services, and he objected to the Director of the Odéon that he was not able, at this late date, to organize his troop. M. de Balzac, he went on, should not have shown himself so proud, so disdainful, when I offered my services to help, as is the custom, his drama of *Quinola,* before the hard public which is awaiting it. One could not trifle so easily with such a man as he, he went on; one could not put one's self above the habits and the most venerable traditions of the theatre with such presumption. Dupont turned to go away after this bitter outburst.

A friendly arm stopped him on the threshold and brought him back. " My dear Dupont," said Lireux to him, " put yourself, I beg you, above this want of consideration, quite unimportant, believe me, coming from an author still a novice in his dramatic career, a career whose gates you guard with such noble dignity. And besides, since M. de Balzac acknowledges his mistake, and is acknowledging it superbly, through my directorial intervention, admit that you would be hard, you would be to blame, if you were not as generous. M. de Balzac is holding out his hand to you, let yours meet his and applaud him noisily. Avenge yourself by giving yourself the magnificent right of saying tomorrow at midnight, when the theatre will be on the point of collapse through the weight of the plaudits: ' It is to me, to me alone, that M. de Balzac, the author of so many masterpieces, owes this immense success, his first in the theatre. Dupont," went on Lireux, this Pindar of irony, " Dupont, you and yours are called the Romans, the Knights of the Chandelier. Justify seriously those generally mocking epithets. Tomorrow evening be Knights through devotion and Romans through victory."

Lireux stopped: his emotion was tarnishing the lenses of his glasses and altering the purity of his voice.

Dupont was carried away. He cried: " How many men does M. de Balzac want at his première? "

"A hundred."

"A hundred! A hundred you said, M. Lireux?"

"A hundred!" the director repeated firmly.

"But that's a whole army! A hundred men! M. de Balzac wants a hundred men, he who did not want any, not one! last month, last week, yesterday even. A hundred!"

"Let the past alone, my dear Dupont. Have you a hundred men of iron and bronze on whom one can count?"

"But . . ."

"Yes?"

"No!"

"Think, Dupont! If you refuse Balzac his hundred men, you are going to force him, I warn you, to get them from Vacher, Procher, Souton, your most implacable rivals, rivals who will grasp at the opportunity, the most magnificent opportunity of supplanting you, upon your seat, under your chandelier. Think!"

Dupont's pride, touched to the quick, awakened a second time to the threat of seeing Balzac asking a hundred men from heads of other claques than the Odéon's.

He cried decisively!

"Tomorrow M. de Balzac will have his hundred men!"

"Bravo, Dupont! I knew that . . ."

"They will be at their post tomorrow night before the curtain goes up."

"With you at their head?"

"It is my duty!"

"It is your honour!"

"I am answerable for them."

"And I for you and for success."

This dialogue of a Cornelian touch and allure, ended by these words, much less dramatic, but not less in tune with the situation, as is said in the theatre:

"Now, M. Lireux," went on Dupont, "now I must immediately know the passages of the play which the plaudits and the bravos of my people must get appreciated; I don't need to tell you that that work would have been done a long time ago if M. de Balzac had not excluded us from the rehearsals as unworthy. It is important," ended Dupont, "that I should without any delay proceed to that grave work, the first rehearsal taking place tomorrow."

"My opinion is exactly the same as yours," answered the director of the Odéon, who then opened a drawer of his desk, and took out a dirty manuscript torn and crushed, in rags, as all the poor manuscripts always are which have gone through the rough campaign of rehearsals.

"This is the manuscript of *Quinola*," said the witty director to Dupont; "we'll mark, if you don't

mind, with pencil marks, all the good passages; let us see that they shall be many, and also all good."

Like a general who, on the eve of a fight, unfolds and studies in his tent the plan of the battle he will fight, Lireux spread out the manuscript of *Quinola* and invited Dupont to note with him the dangerous passages, those for which it would not be prudent to allow admiration, and those from which victory had to come, with wings outstretched, with takings of five thousand francs in each hand.

After bending for a second over the *Quinola* manuscript, the head of the Odéon claque rolled it, put it authoritatively under his arm, and went out majestically from the office of the director, uttering these words which will remain celebrated forever in the theatrical tradition, and which the echoes of the Odéon will remember in their spider-webbed vaults, " I'll do the work at home."

The day of that first performance, or rather, the evening came; it was the 19th of March, 1842 — The theatre glittered in the distance; the metropolitan police on horseback protected the Place de l'Odéon; we entered the room; we looked around. Heavens! what could it mean — it was empty! Quite empty! — Almost empty! — Where were Montjoie and Saint-Denis! the Knights of Saint-Louis, the peers of Charlemagne, the ambassadors, the ministers, and their wives? The theatre, I repeat, was almost empty.

If we seek the reason of that desertion in a body of all Balzac's admirers on such a day, it is because they had said to each other a long time beforehand: "Everybody is fighting to buy seats for the first performance of *Quinola*. It has been said everywhere that there are no more; it was even said that Balzac was obliged to refuse a seat to the Duc de Nemours (this rumor had really been current). What's the use of thinking of trying to get a ticket? Let us be resigned; we'll wait; we'll go later." It was a just and erroneous calculation: it is true that Balzac had said there were no more seats, but there had always been seats; there were more than ever, especially on the first day of the performance of *Quinola*.

The curtain rose and the play began.

Well done, interesting, colorful, swift, the first act of *Quinola* went well, very well; it ran without mishap till the end; but the other acts, great Heavens! What a noise! What hilarity from top to bottom of the theatre! What a feverish gaiety in the parterre! The claque, called too late acted wrongly and were crushed by the enemies of the play! As a sign of serious distress, from which an evening never recovers, there were imitations of animals. The actors could not be heard any longer, but instead one heard the barkings of a dog, of a small dog being run over, the crow of a cock, the braying of a donkey and the neighing of a horse.

The star, Mlle. Héléna Gaussin, did not know how to appease the barbarians. However, mistaken about her failure, she said to the director in her confusion, as she went back stage: "You saw, Monsieur Lireux, how I held them!" — "Ah! Madame, they are paying you back!" answered the caustic director of the Odéon.

What had happened to Balzac during the battle that was being fought for him? No Balzac! Had he taken the face of a Knight of Saint-Louis? Had he gone in a carriage to the Rue Basse or to *Les Jardies?*

Before we find him, however, we'll give a very partial, but a good review of the *Ressources de Quinola* done by a clever hand at criticism. This appreciation will complete the restrospective picture of one of the most curious events in the life of one of our great contemporary geniuses. It is necessary to show the bright side and the dark side in bringing Balzac's great personality to the threshold of posterity.

"There is first (this forms the subject of the play) an unrecognized inventor, who, under Philip II, understood the value of steam and wanted, in spite of the Inquisition, to give his century the benefit of his discovery, more important than that of Galileo. Alphonse Fontanarès is poor, and his only aid is his valet, Quinola. Camoens had Antonio the negro, who begged for him. But Fontanarès's

valet does not beg, certainly not! He is a rogue in the manner of the Mascarille, the Labranche, the Gil-Blas, the Lazarille de Tormès, the Figaro, who has everything those honest people had, except wit. Quinola is attached to Fontanarès. He enables his master to live on the fruits of his industry. Quinola was able to approach the king, to whom he explained at length that his master had found a means of making vessels go without sails or oars, quicker than the wind and against the wind. The king swore that if Fontanarès executed his project, he would make him a grandee of Spain and Duke of Neptunado. What do you think of Neptunado? Fontanarès is taken from the Inquisition cells; he is sent to Barcelona to experiment on one of the state vessels. If he does not succeed, he'll be beheaded.

"In Barcelona, Fontanarès finds a young girl he was in love with; but the king, and that's not very generous on his part, does not even act towards the inventor as our constitutional government acted towards M. Mulot about the well in Grenelle. Fontanarès is pursued and hunted by the pack of his creditors. Quinola spends his time sending them away, but the valets of Don Juan knew their business better than Quinola. His genius only rises to the heights of an harlequinade, and a parade worthy at the most of Bobêche and Galimafrée. A courtesan, Faustina Brancadori, has seen Alphonse

Fontanarès from her balcony; she has fallen in love with him at once. Quinola and a companion of his kind whom he met again, Monopodio, escaped also from the galleys of Tunis, decide to use the insane love of the courtesan, mistress of the viceroy. Quinola soon sees that the courtesan will do him more harm than good. Indeed, when she knows that Fontanarès loves another woman, and the stupid Quinola tells her that himself, she tries to harm the projects of the man of genius, to ruin him, to reduce him to despair, and then to appear to him as a consoling angel. She even encourages the love of a secretary of the viceroy, called Sarpi, for her rival.

"It would be almost useless to tell, if we did not want to relate everything, that Marie, the young girl loved by Fontanarès, who loves him, has given her jewels, her diamonds to enable him to carry his enterprise to the end; Fontanarès is accused of having stolen them. Quinola is capable of it, but he has not committed the crime. Marie sacrifices herself; she acknowledges the gift of her jewels. Fontanarès, pursued on the other side by Sarpi, who claims the fulfillment of the promise made to the king of building a vessel without sails or oars; asks, according to his habit, for a few months' respite. To complete his ill-luck, he is given as a collaborator a false learned man, an ass, a Pancrace, a Murphurius, one of those personages whom Molière

has ridiculed once for all. Fontanarès, annoyed, blows up his vessel when he hears the name of his unworthy collaborator mentioned. And that's why steam has only been revealed in our time. Fontanarès remained with the courtesan and the rogue of a valet. Are those the only aids of genius? If, indeed, the author had some aim in writing his play, this would be the only moral we can draw from it.

"That so-called comedy, of uncertain genre, with no dramatic idea, no stage technique, and in which the author thought to imitate Calderon and Lope de Vega, borrowing only the incoherence of the theatre in its infancy, in which wit is almost entirely absent, and is replaced by strange antitheses, slang terms, dreadful anachronisms or puns which M. de Bièvre himself would have rejected, failed in the midst of continual laughter. How is one to keep one's face straight at such nonsense in five acts, with prologue and epilogue? How is one to approve of jokes, good at the most only to amuse young painters? What charm can one find in such puns as these: 'This man understands better the mechanics of love than the love of mechanics.' — 'You live at the inn of the Golden Sun, is that a reason to dim my grandson's sun?' — 'I'll go to see him blessing everybody with his feet (this about a man who is going to be hanged)!' — 'I have reached the solution of my problem,' cries the in-

ventor; — 'And I the solution of continuity of my doublet,' says the valet. — 'Hatred is not the contrary of love, it is the reverse.' — 'The pearl of my repentance flows out of my eyes.' — 'There are situations when the heart breaks or becomes hard; you hardened mine.'

"We have not the courage to go on with those burlesque quotations.

"*It was in vain that M. de Balzac gave to a public of his own choice (at very high prices), the greater part of the theatre;* the audience generally protested, in the name of literature offended by one of its most prominent men. If that failure was a disgrace for the author, it will be a success of curiosity for the theatre."

I repeat intentionally that this hurried judgment upon Balzac's comedy was excessively severe, and my only proof will be the opinion of another critic on the same work, whose courtesy and gentleness were not his faults. M. Rolle, dramatic critic of the *National,* expressed his views about the *Ressources de Quinola* in the following terms: —

"M. de Balzac had the subject of a beautiful drama, and unfortunately, either through fantasy or negligence, he failed to exploit all its value. The Odéon is the theatre of noisy performances; but never has this terrible battlefield offered such a mixture of cries and exclamations; the parterre,

like real sharpshooters, hid behind nouns and verbs to shoot the play and the actors. However, all the poor wounded fought till the end, with a courage worthy of pity and praise; and often the comedy fought through with repartee and heavy cannonading of wit and originality; it looked as if the enemy would be routed and the play would hold the field, all bloody and torn.

"But I'll leave to others the inhuman pleasure of enlarging *Quinola's* wounds and of dancing with laughter upon them; it is an easy and cruel joy we won't share. There are great errors and great mistakes in the play, but there are also amusing, witty and sometimes deep lines which I will to some criticisms which are ready to insult it with charming gaiety and most agreeable fury."

We shall have had enough of all the incidents of this great dramatic event and of all the articles that have to do with it, when we have extracted from the touching and learned preface to *Quinola* a few lines of sorrow and bitterness written by the moved Balzac, with a bitterness and sorrow born of that work and of that redoubtable performance.

"'The day will come,' he said, 'when that play will be used as a stick to beat a new play, as has been done with all my books, and even my play called *Vautrin*, to crush the *Ressources de Quinola*.'

"Several volumes could be filled with the lamentations of the critics who, for the last twenty years,

have asked for comedies in the Italian, Spanish and English manner: one is tried, and all would rather forget what they have been saying for twenty years, so that they may smother a man courageous enough to venture in such a fecund course, which old age renders almost new.

" In producing a work with all the liberties of the old French and Spanish theatres, the author permitted himself an attempt demanded by public opinion and by all those who go to first performances: he wanted to ask a real public and to have the play acted before a theatre filled with a public who had paid. The failure of that trial has been so well brought out by all the papers that the *necessity of the claque is proved forever*. The author was caught on the horns of the dilemma so well known to experts: to have twelve hundred people who had not paid, would cause the success thus obtained to be denied; to have twelve hundred people pay for their seats is to render success almost impossible. The author preferred danger. Such is the reason for that first performance when so many people were displeased at having been raised to the dignity of independent judges.

" Though the author had done nothing to obtain it, some people had given their encouragement to the attempt beforehand, and those have been more insulting than the critics; but the author looks at such misadventures as one of the greatest happi-

nesses that could have come to him, as one gains experience in losing false friends. So it is as much a pleasure as a duty for him to thank publicly those who have remained faithful to him, like M. Léon Gozlan, toward whom he has contracted a debt of gratitude; like M. Victor Hugo, who has in a way protested against the public of the first performance by coming back to see the play on the second night; to M. de Lamartine and Madame de Girardin, who kept their first idea in spite of the general irritation. Such approbations console him for a failure."

We don't need to emphasize all the bitterness in those passages, it is useless to feel indignant and sorrowful twenty years after the event. Balzac did not remain stunned for long by the brutal fall from his five-act height: here is the real and consoling proof.

Do you know how and in what state Balzac was found — because he was found at last — after the performance of *Quinola,* at half-past twelve? He was asleep! there was no end of trouble in awakening him and getting him into the cab which brought him to his house.

A last word about that strange play, a word, which is the crystallization of the conscientious judgment of its writer. If a friendly and authoritative hand relieved it here and there of some perhaps dangerous sentences, it would have, we are sure of it,

a success at least as great as that of *Mercadet,* at a revival which would be a resurrection and it would take permanent rank beside the comedy of Lesage, whose mastery, whose frank and heady Castilian flavor it possesses.

PART FOUR

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A LARGE firm of booksellers established for many a long year upon the quay, so Parisian, of the Augustins, between the Rue Dauphine and la Vallée, a stone's throw from the Pont Neuf, the firm of Charles Béchet, felt the need of modifying the special character of its old book trade.

The literary movement of 1830, and, at the time of which I speak, it was only 1834, had encouraged many century-old booksellers to leave the peaceful sale of classical and serious works, and to try, rapier in hand, the more noisy, more risky, but apparently more lucrative sale of books of imagination.

All the publishers, on the same side of the water which bathed in ancient times the sinister foundations of the Tour de Nesle, were envying the Gosselin firm, which had so rapidly become rich through the novels of Walter Scott and a few French authors, and which dealt in that kind of publication to the exclusion of all others. There, they said to themselves, are quick results, the sale of a whole edition in a few days, sometimes in a few hours; there lie

brilliant connections, rich for the future, with the young literary school; there is a constant familiarity with the press, whose power over the public is becoming more and more formidable, so formidable and certain, that a publisher knows beforehand that an article in the *Journal des Débats*, for example, will sell fifteen hundred copies of a work; an article in the *Constitutionnel*, eight hundred; an article in the *Courrier Français*, four hundred; an article in the small fashionable papers, three hundred. There was hardly ever an error in those calculations. How far away those times are from us!

Among the big publishing houses which turned enthusiastically to the production of novels, the firm of Charles Béchet was one of the first and best prepared for the change. This statement is necessary, for the publishers who had hastened the change died before leaving port; the simple launching sunk them; they disappeared under the burden. And it is easily explained: the manuscripts of novels were bought at very high prices, and the Revolution of July, which had taken place only three or four years before, had raised the percentage of discount to ruinous proportions, which forced the sale of almost all books on cash terms; so that, although books, and especially novels, were at that time widely read, very much sought after, very much discussed, the profits were not proportionate to the sales, although they were actually very big,

very big, especially if compared to the profits today in the same trade.

Led by the experience of some people she had put at the head of her plumbing house, Madame Veuve Béchet invited to her home, at parties cleverly contrived, celebrated authors, whose reputations, without having reached their zenith, at least entitled them to a certain amount of prestige, whose renown, if not entirely achieved, at least soon would be, and who were sure to bring a lot of money to whatever publisher would be able to secure them for his list.

It was at those weekly meetings that I met and saw often Béranger, who had stopped publishing songs at that time, but who was still, and perhaps more than ever, the delightful after-dinner and chimney-corner conversationalist; Latouche, who brought his pockets full of words, polished, engraved, chiselled cold, like Byzantine daggers, with which he knifed and killed, laughingly, after coffee and liqueurs; Brissot-Thivars, an excellent man, with a heart of gold, an enthusiastic mind, an encyclopedic culture like Diderot's, a good man, loved and esteemed by all, devoted to public health, of which he had been made inspector, as one would be devoted to music or poetry; speaking constantly of public health; bringing back all questions, moral, literary, or political, to his beloved public health which, it must be said, made great and useful progress, thanks to his rare and patriotic initiative;

Doctor Gentil, attached, at that time, as man of letters, to the firm of Béchet; Louis Raybaud, with no thought at that time that he would some day be deputy of the Bouches-du-Rhône, and still less with any thought that he would be a member of the Institut, trying to write verses, all sorts of verses, trying to write prose, travel sketches, but young, as gay as a tambourine, as tender as a flute, brightening the Béchet evenings with his Southern gaiety, full of sparks and laughter.

Some women, gay and good company, also came to those happy evenings, always preceded by excellent dinners. My memory still retains, in the opaque cloud of my sojourn in Paris, Madame Brissot-Thivars, fairy-like in the drawing-room, who by the brightness of her face, the savour of her wit, the grace of her words, attenuated the oceanic noise, the coppery voice, all the physical strength of her husband, whose tall figure, large eyes, large mouth, sweeping gestures, made him the worthy husband of a fairy; an ogre, the most beautiful drawing-room ogre I have ever seen.

When I first met Balzac at one of Madame Béchet's dinners, the conversation was about the approaching departure of the Duchesse de Berri for Sicily, after a captivity of eight months in the fortress of Blaye. The ship, the *Agathe*, which was to take her to Palermo, was to set sail in two or three days, and it was known that General Bugeaud, her

stern guardian, was not to leave her until her arrival at her destination. Although there were many people present who were hostile to the government of Louis-Philippe, and also many Republicans who were tacitly beginning to come to an understanding with the partisans of the fallen government, so that through co-operation they might be strong enough to upset the dynasty founded in 1830, no faction present appeared well-disposed towards the Duchesse de Berri. The admiration which had been given the Princess when she was fleeing through the thorny bushes, the plains, the turflands, and the swamps of the Vendee, covered with thousands of soldiers searching for her, that admiration had cooled off greatly since the official admission of her pregnancy, although easily explained and legitimatized through her marriage with the Count Hector Luchesi Palli. But she had lost her poetry; the rays of the halo had left her forehead. A story magnificent at the beginning, romantic half-way through, was ending almost as a bourgeois romance; a formidable insurrection had been ended by a declaration of paternity at the town hall.

However, on the other side, a good many legitimists with a more enduring enthusiasm, spoke loudly of the pregnancy, the accouchement, and the marriage declaration of the Duchesse de Berri, as a fable invented by the Tuileries. Balzac was among those. He admitted nothing. The betrayal by the

Orléanists was the cause of everything; treason explained everything. Those who had betrayed at Nantes, which had delivered the princess to General Dermoncourt and to the police commissary Maurice Duval, would not have been embarrassed at inventing a pregnancy, which is always easy, or at inventing an accouchement, which is a little less easy, but possible, nor embarrassed at forcing a woman broken in body and spirit to declare that she was married, to steal her son's crown from her while appearing to save the honor of a great name and race.

"But," someone objected to Balzac, who at dessert was upholding his impossible thesis, his head warmed by champagne, "M. de Mèsnard left Blaye at once after the declaration made by the Duchesse de Berri that she was the wife of the Count Hector de Luchesi Palli." — "Lies! Trickery! A snare! Betrayal!" replied Balzac. "The good faith and loyalty of M. de Mèsnard have been betrayed. And M. de Mèsnard, repenting of his unmotivated withdrawal, has gone back to the princess, and no one among you is ignorant of the fact that he is accompanying her to Palermo." "Of course, but first M. de Mèsnard declared in a letter that he would consent to follow her to Palermo only on a formal order from her. This order was sent to him. Then only he obeyed." "Who read that order?" Balzac went on, more and more incensed, looking around the

drawing-room defiantly and planting interrogation marks as big as staves before each of his neighbors at table. "Show me that letter! Letters, indeed! There are always letters to hang people. But when they have to be shown, they are only words which a pin will burst and the wind carry away. I don't believe in that letter." — "All right! don't believe in it; but what do you say to the declaration of M. Deneux, the doctor present at the accouchement of the Duchesse? M. Deneux, her friend, the only doctor whom she wished to be present, M. Deneux, who wrote in his own hand, and whom you can't accuse of betrayal: 'I have just delivered the Duchesse de Berri, spouse in legitimate wedlock of Count Hector Luchesi Palli, brother of the Prince del Campo Franco, gentleman in waiting of the King of the Two Sicilies, resident at Palermo.' What do you say to that?"

"I say that, astonished as I am by that declaration, M. de Brissac and Madame d'Hautefort, who were with the Princess much longer than M. Deneux, whose presence at Blaye we have never approved, and who went there only of his own irresponsible volition, have never, either of them given that declaration the confirmation of their signatures. I add — what you know as well as I do — that a legal document asserting that there is in that affair 'legal presumption of a child' has been deposited simultaneously at the Royal Court in Paris

and in Bordeaux by the Vicomte de Conny, the Baron de Ludre, the Vicomte de Kergolay, the Comte de Floirac and some other notabilities of the legitimist party; so that the reasons for denying are much stronger than the reasons for believing; that besides, in politics as well as in theology, there are things that cannot be discussed, above criticism. These . . ." — "These . . ." went a murmur around Balzac. — "These, gentlemen," said Balzac, raising his voice to a passionate pitch, " are my feelings, and those who do not share them . . ." A guest saw in time the heated turn the conversation was taking, and he tried to head it off, instead of trying awkwardly to change the subject too abruptly. " Yet if," he said, " as M. de Balzac thinks, all this was only a game of the Court at the Tuileries to vilify the Duchesse de Berri's character, would a soldier, General Bugeaud, consent to take part in it, and to be the jailer of the Princesse? "

" You are trying to impose upon me! " cried Balzac impetuously, for the well-advised interrupter had given him an easy opportunity to be on the side on which everybody would agree with him. " That's a magnificent and triumphant reason you are giving us, the discretion, silence and modesty of General Bugeaud! General of what? of whom? General at the Maternity Hospital in Paris! "

It is necessary to say that never has any man, except Sir Hudson Lowe, been so hated, ridiculed,

insulted, execrated, accursed, as General Bugeaud was at that time, for having accepted the command of the fortress of Blaye, which had become the prison of the Duchesse de Berri. On the other side, one must hasten to add, without any reference to the question of whether a soldier has the right to refuse such a mission, the general was not yet the dignified pacifier of Algeria, the glorious victor of Isly, Marshal Bugeaud. — "Your General Bugeaud," went on Balzac, gritting his teeth as if he wanted to speak, but was holding himself back; "your General Bugeaud . . . !" As Balzac was uttering that sentence, Doctor Gentil interrupted the conversation by his entrance, and said, looking at the evening paper: "Gentlemen, I announce the departure of the Duchesse de Berri for Sicily; she left France this morning." — "Are you sure of that?" asked Balzac keenly interested. "Here is the paper with the telegram announcing it," answered Doctor Gentil, handing the paper to Balzac. After reading the announcement, Balzac rose, if that expression can describe what he did, for in a discussion one could never tell whether he was sitting or standing, he wriggled so much, and he said, after going on tiptoe to the windows overlooking the Quai des Augustins and closing them (they had been left open less on account of the heat of the time of year — it was only the beginning of June — than because it seemed warm after dinner), he said:

"Gentlemen, I am going to announce to you good news, an event which no one can prevent now." "What is it? what is it?" all asked, surrounded by those clouds of mystery which Balzac always loved to add to a conversation, for no one has ever been so fond of a dramatic setting as he was. "General Bugeaud," he went on, "will never come back from the pleasure journey he is undertaking at the expense of the Princess." And he went on, in a less exaggerated fashion: "You understand that that man has made the most worthy and sacred object of our royalistic affection suffer far too much, for someone not to have had the good thought of ridding the world of him, a world which won't mourn him much. Some young men devoted to her cause, and determined to undertake anything, have gone quietly to Palermo, where they have known for the last fortnight that the Princess was to be sent, still under the supervision of General Bugeaud. They went there first via Marseilles. They are now in Palermo, and they are ready on the quays to welcome with their loyal plaudits the arrival of the Duchesse de Berri. Honours await the latter, other things the former. In Palermo, he will receive the welcome which young Las Cases gave to Sir Hudson Lowe as he came back from St. Helena to London; and if the general better disposed than Sir Hudson Lowe, wants to fight, well, they'll fight, and there is every reason to believe, that, with the choice of

weapons which will engage his loyalty, he won't return to France soon."

Coffee was served after Balzac's conversation, and that sentence fell into the china cups, and was drowned in rum and cognac. Other subjects of conversation came up, which interested me less; but I learned several months after that dinner, that as far as Balzac's information was concerned, General Bugeaud, whether warned or not of what was in store for him, had not gone ashore once during the anchorage of the *Agathe* in the port of Palermo, and that he had gone at once from that ship on board the *Acteon,* commanded by Captain Nonay, to go back to France, where he was soon to find a more brilliant destiny than dueling.

That prediction by Balzac of an event which was partly fulfilled acquainted me for the first time (since it has been confirmed on many other occasions) with his excessive fondness for secret negotiations, for expeditions carried on crookedly in darkness, for projects planned a long time in advance, in fine, with his artistic leaning to police intrigue and all of the machinations it uses, through necessity, to achieve the uncovering of thieves and criminals.

M. Brissot-Thivars, who probably was the first to see those tendencies in Balzac, proposed to him, before me, a pleasure trip of strange novelty. I have already mentioned the very laudable passion of

M. Brissot-Thivars for public health: as if to develop it more — if that were possible — the state had turned over to the township of Paris an important line of sewers which it had built since the bad days of the Revolution of 1830, to give work to the unemployed and to prevent a return of the cholera, which was then attributed, in the books on hygiene, to the unhealthiness of some sections in the neighborhood of the Hôtel de Ville. Through his duties as an inspector, M. Brissot-Thivars was called upon to share with the road-surveyors the supervision of those new sewers. But what a difference! he said, between their elegant construction and the former sewers! He spoke of them with delight; he quoted the Romans, but we had gone miles farther than they: the sewers of Tarquin were of grindstone, but the Paris sewers! Spacious, high, built of ashlar, vaulted, paved, bordered with pavements, only trees were missing in these monumental sewers to turn them into real subterranean walks, much more beautiful than open highways. When he had ended his hymn of praise, Brissot-Thivars asked Balzac, easily aroused if he was spoken to with conviction, if he would not be curious to see them, and to go over them with him. He had said a hundred times more than was necessary to excite Balzac, who not only accepted, but wished to settle at once a day and hour to inspect the sewers. For the understanding of the reader, I must say here,

that, as they were newly built, no water was running through them, so that they were like roads built under Paris; but roads in which one walked, at all times, only by the light of torches. No one can imagine all the escapes through the cellars, all the subterranean surprises, all the hidden meetings, Balzac dreamed about, when he thought of the walk he was to take through the bowels of Paris, which he could use later in his books; but we shall see shortly, however, how someone showed more imagination than he did. "You would complete my satisfaction," said Brissot-Thivars, delighted to see him so well disposed, "if after having gone over the principal dependencies of my kingdom of public health, you would give me the honour of coming with me to admire its capital." The capital of the sewers alluded to by the excellent M. Brissot-Thivars was Montfaucon. Yes, Montfaucon, where old broken-down horses, and lost dogs are destroyed, where many other mysterious events occur. Balzac did not flinch. He was going to see the last moments of those brilliant horses who prance so proudly during their lives in the alleys of the Bois de Boulogne; he would see what became of those pretty King-Charles and those delightful light-chestnut dogs when they are caught by police orders; he would see . . . but we shall see ourselves what he was to see. Everything was decided, and the program of the excursion was planned thus:

First day: A visit to the sewers.

Second day: A visit to Montfaucon.

The visit to the sewers was arranged for the following Sunday; the meeting place, the banks of the Seine, under the Quay de la Grève, near the bridge of the Hotel-de-Ville, at the grating of a sewer which opens there; the time an hour after midnight, when all Paris sleeps and won't be awake for a long time, so that we would not be worried by the noise of cabs over our heads. M. Brissot-Thivars would get ladders, torches, guides, etc., etc.

Doctor Gentil and I were invited to the expedition, and two other people whose names it would be difficult for me to remember now. And, besides, one sent excuses the day before and the other did not come for some reason or other.

The following Saturday, the day of the weekly dinners at the Bechet's, on the eve of the day chosen for our nocturnal adventure, M. Brissot-Thivars, who arrived late, and who came late, we thought, because he was busy at the moment over the preparations, entered pale and distracted, and said to us, while shaking hands: "My friends, my dear friends, arm yourself with courage; there won't be any party." — "What no party? And what is going to prevent it?" — "A very grave reason; the insurrection at Lyons." — "The insurrection? . . ." "Yes, it has exasperated the Republican party. The secret societies want revenge for the shootings of

General Aymar. The police have found the network of a conspiracy . . ." — "But what has that to do with the sewers?" Balzac interrupted. "Why, the conspirators were to meet in those recently built sewers, then go to the Hotel-de-Ville, and the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, under the Rues Saint-Martin and Saint-Denis, and, at a moment prearranged by them, to blow up some houses to frighten people, and then they were to go out armed, and then the rest."

That that project should have existed in the heated heads of the Republicans, always on the search, at that feverish period, for more or less violent means of arousing Paris, is not quite impossible to admit. Anyway the plot did not materialize any more than did our mysterious procession under the streets of Paris, whose novelty and joy was snatched away from us.

But if the visit to the sewers did not take place, the pleasure party to Montfaucon had a better fate. We'll relate the different incidents which helped to engrave it on our memory.

In order not to frighten us too much by the eccentricity of the hour fixed for departure, five in the morning had at first been mentioned; the day before, it was not five but three o'clock, which was very different. The modification might possibly have changed the intention of some of us to risk the pilgrimage to Montfaucon; but it did not. And yet at

three o'clock, it was night instead of dawn, it was cold, bitterly cold, because it had rained a lot the night before, and there was no freshness of the morning air. The inconvenience would disappear, we thought, in the general charm of the day. The rendezvous was arranged at the end of the Rue Dauphine, near the Pont Neuf, as the most convenient place to meet. Balzac lived then in the Rue de Tournon, Doctor Gentil at the Pointe Saint-Eustache, M. Brissot-Thivars, our charming guide, in the tall house, since pulled down, opposite the Louvre, touching the angle of the Rue des Pretres-Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, a big house where the celebrated surgeon Dupuytren had lived and died.

Everyone was on time. We had not decided how we would go to Montfaucon; on foot or driving. As we passed in front of the Cour Batave, M. Brissot-Thivars said to us: "I had thought, my good friends, of taking you there in a carriage, but I had to give up the idea. Last night and the preceding nights, it rained buckets; the roads outside the barriers are impassable; I have seen puddles in which horses go up to their bridles, and from which they come out with the greatest difficulty. From the Barrière du Combat to Montfaucon it would take us in a carriage more than an hour and a half, a distance we can cover on foot in half an hour; and time is precious, very precious! I have so many things to show you before daylight! . . .

And so we went on foot. We reached the Faubourg Saint-Martin, and walked along as far as the Rue des Vinaigriers. At the end of that street, we crossed the canal at the Quai Valmy, and leaving the Hospital Saint-Louis on our right, we went to the Barrière du Combat through the Rue Grange-aux-Belles.

The road so far had not been covered with roses; the Parisians who live in that neighborhood will easily believe us; but from the barrier, at that time still celebrated because of the spectacle of the animal fights which were given a hundred feet away, it offered to our eyes such a state of confusion, ruin, water here, black mud there, it inspired in us such an immediate and universal horror, that our feet were numb, and that a common terror made us stop where we were.

Like a clever general, M. Brissot-Thivars understood the demoralization of his army. He tried to revive our spirits by the following words: "In a short quarter of an hour, we will be there, my dear friends; but I won't wait any longer, I won't wait till the end of the quarter of an hour to tell you the chief surprise which is awaiting you." — "What is it?" asked Balzac, in a tone which meant: "If it is not to my taste, I won't go any further." — "Here is the place," went on M. Brissot-Thivars, "where the animals' fights take place." — "All right, I know that," said Balzac.

"We all know that; go on." — "Yesterday, one of Lord Egerton's horses was strangled by one of the dogs of the establishment in a very exciting fight." — "Well?" "Well, that strangled horse has been taken to Montfaucon, and has been laid aside, according to my orders, for you alone!" — "Are we going to eat it?" asked Balzac. "No, but in the short space of an hour, you will have the spectacle," answered M. Brissot-Thivars, "the rare and magnificent spectacle of this horse, one of the strongest in Lord Egerton's stables, being devoured entirely by the rats of Montfaucon, because the rats of Montfaucon, remember, are the most voracious animals, the most ferocious you ever have seen. So I have arranged for you the spectacle of a horse reduced in an hour to a skeleton by the rats. Now, he who loves me, can follow me!"

No one remained behind; the muddy puddles were crossed, the muddy mounds attacked with spirit, the mudholes crossed in the twinkling of an eye, and, in our eagerness to see a horse devoured by rats, we committed all kinds of silly acts on the road. Taking the knotted stick of M. Brissot-Thivars, Balzac went and hammered at the heavy wooden gate, framed with iron and clotted with nails, which closed the entrance of the theatre for animal fights. From the sleeping arena, insolently aroused from its sleep, came forth a medley of voices and cries which could be heard from Saint-

Denis and even further. Dogs, twenty kinds of dogs, ferocious and growling bulldogs, wolf-hounds, matins, Danes, barked and shook their chains, and with their howlings, made more stirring and more lamentable by the silence of the night, were mixed the cries of twenty bulls. That episode cheered us all, and we went gaily on our road, our right the Buttes Saint-Chaumont, the beginning of Montfaucon, the outskirts of Belleville.

We were still at some distance from our destination, when we saw, scintillating through the darkness, a small reddish light, like the eye of a drunken man half asleep. "What is that fairy palace?" asked Balzac. — "That," answered M. Brissot-Thivars, "is a tavern, open day and night, known to all the employes of Montfaucon and La Villette by the name of Fontaine de Vénus." — "Venus seems to me a very happy choice," said Balzac, "for a sign in such a place." — "For one sou," went on M. Brissot, "they give a glass of grog with Cayenne pepper, which their customers find delightful."

We had reached the door of the Fontaine de Vénus. Perhaps the arrival of the Chief of Public Health had been announced, or was it perhaps only a spontaneous movement of popularity following our presence; but as soon as we were in front of the door of the tavern, the carters who drive at night the strange carts, whose weight the pavements resent a long time after their passage, came up and

offered us each a glass of their famous vitriolic grog, such a hot, sour, diabolically alcoholised drink, that one felt drunk from just breathing the steam. We hesitated to drink, mostly because of the drink offered, a little because of those who offered it. We all have prejudices; but whoever has prejudices should stay at home. Besides, Doctor Gentil, who, in the formidable locality into which we were penetrating, was beginning his functions as hygienic advisor, said to us in Latin: "Drink now, or you'll be forced to drink afterwards."

Doctor Gentil was perfectly right, we had to be fortified before breathing the pungent atmosphere of Montfaucon.

We were just entering that vast indeterminate space, enveloped by a blue fog, behind which shone some pale stars, because night was not over, not for another hour, when we heard coming from another road, clank-clank, and quickly, a lame vehicle, half cart, half raft. It creaked, jimped, went sideways, grated its sides against its wheels. It almost took off both sides of the gate, or rather the kind of gate, planted at the entrance of Montfaucon, when it turned and slowed down to enter the establishment. It was covered with mud.

On its floor stood two men wrapped in sheepskins, one with the wool inside, the other, more elegant, with the wool outside. The younger held a lighted torch which he bent and shook to light the passage,

and from which came sheaves of sparks and tongues of flame; the other was driving the carriage, reins in one hand, a whip in the other. We saw in the reddish light which appeared and disappeared from that sinister cart, four sprawled out objects which looked like the four legs of an animal. We drew aside to let all those flames and that noise pass. The rolling cart stopped. The two men climbed down and two other men who had come running from the other end of the establishment, joined them, and they pulled without too much effort, those four sprawling legs and stood them erect or almost erect. An almost inanimate form balanced itself upon those four trembling poles. It was a horse.

M. Brissot-Thivars had left us for an instant to give orders to his subordinates, warning them of the arrival of his guests, in whose honour some surprise had been prepared in the establishment.

"Poor beast!" cried Balzac, sighing at the sight of this ghost of a horse, "that's the end of those noble animals who are so attached to us, so devoted, so useful during their lives; what a sad end!"

"Oh, that's not the end," said the man who wore the sheepskin with the wool outside.

"Why, what do you mean? I can't see what one could still . . ."

"No, good sir, it is not the end. And the meat do you think it is nothing?"

"What meat?"

"Horse's meat, of course!"

"Have you any idea of eating the meat of that horse?"

"Yes . . . first we'll take the filet for us both, my comrade's family and mine, and we'll cook it with small onions; and it's very tasty! My word of honour, you'd think, it was partridge and cabbage; and what we don't want, the rib roasts, we'll sell it to others, who will make lovely grills, some beefsteaks . . . good enough to make anyone eat them. Afterwards . . ."

"There is an afterwards?" Balzac interrupted. He had no idea of eating horseflesh, which has only been considered seriously lately, and with much less disgust than formerly.

The man in the sheepskin with the wool outside said nothing; the other still went on:

"And in the Paris restaurants, and the small taverns near the barriers, do you think that they balk at giving horseflesh to their clients! They are very happy that we sell it to them all the year round. . . . At the price beef fetches, what would become of them without Montfaucon? Montfaucon is their Poissy market, their meat market, their Quai de la Vallée."

"To eat horseflesh! To sell horseflesh!" Balzac went on repeating. "What a horrible lapse of civilization, returning to anthropophagy through hippophagy! Today, we eat the horse, tomorrow we

shall eat the horseman. One meal is only separated from the other by the thickness of the saddle."

"We sell much more than its flesh," went on the man with the sheepskin turned inside.

"What else do you sell?"

"Well, the skin, the hair, and the bones, and the tripes, and its hooves. Do you think all that's lost?"

"Yes, I know," said Balzac, "I know like everybody else that you sell the horsehide to the tanners, which pass it on, after different operations, to shoemakers, saddlers, *layetiers* . . ."

"And the bones?"

"Yes, from the bones, buttons are made."

"And sugar! sir, sugar! With the bones of this horse which we shall kill before you, next week the sugar you'll put in your coffee will be clarified."

The poor horse was shivering and shaking among us during this strange funereal oration.

Balzac was melancholy, we were pensive.

The man went on, waving his resinous lighted torch over the peeled back of the poor animal, whose vitreous eyes had the immobility of death. "But a dead horse is a blessing; it is better a hundred times than a live one. And we have said nothing yet about the bowels!"

"The bowels! Do you eat them also?"

"Oh, no! You eat them."

"What, we?"

"Isn't it in the horse's guts that the meat of those

much appreciated sausages, called sausages of Bologna, of Spain, mortadelles, are put?"

We all looked at each other, remembering the past and frowning.

"Whatever you do," went on the employé of Montfaucon, "you all taste of the horse, in one form or another."

"I did not know of horse sausages," said Balzac, "that's certainly using everything."

"That's not all, sir; don't let us forget the intestines. The intestines are sold to Naples. The best strings for stringed instruments are made there from the intestines of horses."

Balzac looked up at the stars:

"And we shall dance to the shaking of those intestines!"

"Yes, sir!"

And copying Balzac's sentence, the man repeated: "And we shall dance to the shaking of those intestines," and he kicked the unhappy horse in the stomach. It tried to moan, but it did not have the strength.

"It is awful!" cried Balzac: "Let that poor beast die in peace and without insult. It is sad, very sad!" he added, "when one thinks that that infirm, dying animal there, perhaps in its youth was a beautiful war horse, neighing at the noise of powder, at the sound of the bugle, that it entered victorious into the walls of a conquered capital, prancing, rear-

ing, carrying upon its back the hero of some great victory."

Until now the man who wore the sheepskin with the wool inside had talked familiarly with Balzac of the properties of the horse destined for the slaughter house; this time it was the man with the sheepskin with the wool outside who answered him:

"Now, that's guessing right! Yes, that poor beast went through all the wars of the Empire, as you say. It belonged . . . it belonged, to whom did it belong?" he asked the other.

The other skin did not seem to know . . . The one who had asked went on "I know. He belonged, the coachman who sold it to us said, to a marshal or a general . . . I could not say which . . ."

"There!" said Balzac, whose eyes became as round as escarcuncles and threw out sparks. "What did I say? To what general did this horse belong? Were you told?"

"We were."

The man had had time to think.

"To the Marshal . . ."

"Then it was a Marshal? . . ."

"To Marshal Brune."

"To a friend of the Emperor! To one of his most faithful companions! To the soldier of Stralsund! And it is bought for a few liards to be sold for a few miserable sous, after having been stunned, pulled apart, torn apart. Fie on the glory and gratitude of

man. The master of the horse, the hero, murdered in Avignon, and the horse killed at Montfaucon. A very moving lesson in philosophy."

"I beg your pardon, kind sir," said Balzac's interlocutor, "a horse such as this does not cost only a few liards, as you were pleased to say. We buy it for twelve francs, and when it is distributed in the way I told you, it brings fifty or sixty francs."

"And it is for fifty or sixty francs that you are going to deprive this interesting animal of its last days; let him die of old age, as God has intended that we all should die, beasts and people. Will you take one hundred francs for the horse?"

The men with the sheepskin looked at each other, already there had been signs of understanding between them under Balzac's enthusiastic and philanthropic nose, and he renewed his proposal:

"Will you take one hundred francs for the horse?"

"Well!"

That word appeared to Balzac as a new hesitation, and he renewed his question in a more acceptable form:

"Will you take one hundred and twenty francs?"

"All right! One hundred and twenty francs."

"You'll put the horse in the best corner of the stables; do you hear?"

"Dear sir, be sure of that, we'll give him the guest room."

"You'll give him a good litter," went on Balzac.

"He'll be looked after as if he were in the Home for Incurables."

"I shall come back to see that you take good care of him."

"All right, sir; of course, if he dies, you won't accuse us of his death?"

"No."

"And you'll pay us thirty sous a day for his food until that time?"

Balzac was going to say yes and give the authorization to Doctor Gentil, who had charge then of his financial arrangements with the firm of Bechet, to handle the affair of the horse with those horse-dealers of a new kind, when M. Brissot-Thivars, who came for us to take us to new pleasures, and had heard the last words of the bargain, said in his thundering voice:

"But all this is a joke, a real joke: you are their dupe. These scoundrels play every day the same comedy for the too-sensitive visitors of Montfaucon. They'll take your hundred or hundred and twenty francs, and in a month they'll present you with a bill of fifty francs for the food of a horse, which has only twelve hours to live, whatever food is given to him, for a nag from Limousin which has no more belonged to the Marshal Brune than to the Marshal Lobau, to the Emperor Charlemagne or to the Knight Roland. But the next old horse, broken, half

dead, which will enter here in five minutes, will have the honour, if we believe these gentlemen, of having served in the war under Marshal Ney, or King Murat. For the partisans of the Empire, he will have been at Waterloo, where he will have got a spear thrust in the chest; for the legitimists, Charles X will have mounted him on the day of his coronation at Rheims. — Get out of here, quickly," said M. Brissot-Thivars, changing tones, to the two historians of Montfaucon; "take away that horse; and you gentlemen, please follow me."

Before taking us to the private part of Montfaucon, where we were to enjoy the tasteful spectacle of Lord Egerton's horse being devoured by rats, M. Brissot-Thivars, took us to a kind of den, lighted by two smoking lamps, which enabled us to see, seated on the floor, several women occupied in classifying by breed the dogs, which had been killed, strangled, crushed, smothered in Paris during the night.

Such women! real Canidies; tufts of white or red hair escaped in disorder from the faded handkerchiefs which covered their heads. Their sleeves were turned up to their shoulders, and with their witches' hands, whose nails looked like claws in that semi-darkness, they accomplished their task, which was not only to classify the dogs, as I have said, but also to relieve them of their copper collars. There were no other seats but the piled-up dogs, and four of us

sat on the moving piles of dogs, and examined the women's work. Balzac devoured with his eyes this picture of the Tenier school, and studied especially with his bright curiosity, with his talents for distilling the essence from every situation, for it can truthfully be said that he distilled every scene which passed through his eyes before it penetrated to the depths of his brain; he studied in that moment, as we were saying, the folds, the wrinkles, the ridges, the ravines, the sloughs which showed upon the faces of those women, tanned by the perpetual fire of brandy, when they spelled aloud the names of the dogs engraved upon their collars, their addresses and the sayings which accompanied their names.

As these names had always been chosen with care, and as the sayings expressed the delicate feeling of his master or mistress for the animal, and since any fine feeling which had anything to do with intimacy was far removed from those women, real savages of civilization, Parisian of Oceania and the South Seas, it was a concert of irony and mocking sayings, when they read, for example, upon the collars they undid: "My name is Miss Violet, and I live in the Rue de Provence, No. . . ." — or — "My name is Spring, my master is the Count of . . . Rue de . . ." or else — "Bring back Zulma to her good mistress who awaits her Rue de . . . No. . . ." — "Here," said one witch to the other,

"pack Miss Violet with all the English poodles. Aren't they stupid to give them such names? Where on earth do they get them? All dogs ought to be sheep dogs and furnish twelve pounds of fat."

"Is dog fat sold," asked Balzac, "since you speak of it with such respect?"

"Such a question! and with what do you think all the potatoes and all the white fish which is sold in Paris are fried? Miss Violet will provide a good sized pot of fat, and Zulma will give at least two pounds. We shall give her back to her good mistress as lard."

"Who will give you the promised reward?"

"It makes the gentleman laugh."

"The dogs' fat makes the gentleman laugh."

Indeed Balzac was laughing a lot, at the actors and the setting of this spectacle in the vast charnel house of Montfaucon.

The inspector of public health was pleased by the keen curiosity with which we looked at those scenes hitherto unknown till then to us. "Ask her a few questions," he said under his breath to Balzac, pointing at one of the women; "try to find out what there is in creatures so much apart from ordinary civilization."

And really, the one whom M. Brissot-Thivars designated, without being a Greek beauty deserved to be distinguished from her companions. How, in such a place, did she manage to have upon her

cheeks the signs of youth and health? We could not understand it, and M. Brissot-Thivars, attributed them without any hesitation, and perhaps he was right, to the superior nutritive qualities of horse-flesh.

Balzac, who did not ask for anything better than a chance to study the anatomy of customs, in any place, pulled up his chair of heaped dogs, nearer the dog divans upon which the ladies were seated. We followed suit, and the author of the *Physiology of Marriage* began the dialogue thus:

"How old are you, Princess?"

"Twenty-four," answered the Princess of Montfaucon, taking her pipe from her mouth. She was smoking and took from time to time some brandy from a small metal cup, tied by a chain to a bottle never remaining very long on its base.

"Are you married?"

"In the thirteenth ward."

"I thought so, Princess."

"It is not the *worst* ward. There is nothing like that in the marriages that are blessed there . . ." And with her foot she touched the heap of collars she had taken from the dogs. Her metaphor was striking.

"You are happily married?"

"The happiest in Belleville and the Buttes Saint-Chaumont."

"You don't wish for anything, then, O Fortunate

Princess? Your husband, your livelihood, that's the height of happiness for you?"

Again she took her pipe from her mouth and drank another glass of brandy before answering.

"Oh, no," she answered afterwards: "I dream of other things."

The word *dream* astonished us. How could that word, which has remained poetical in spite of its long service, have reached this world? What a mystery! But we had to accept it.

"And what are you dreaming about, since you dream?" asked M. Brissot-Thivars, interrupting Balzac's questioning, the cleverness of which he did not suspect. "I'll bet I know. You dream about a beautiful house on the Rue de la Paix."

"No, I am not crazy for houses like those. I would rather like a country house in Pantin."

"Then it is a beautiful carriage you'd like?"

"A carriage! I can't even stand the omnibus. My heart fails me when I get into it."

"Then you would like to have Indian shawls?"

"I don't even know what they are."

"A lot of money?"

"It is not very clever to make such a wish. You also would like to have a lot. It is nothing unusual."

"Then I can't guess."

"My dear Brissot," said Balzac, to the disappointed inspector, "let me take your place. Your greatest happiness," added Balzac turning to the

woman so disappointingly interrogated by M. Brissot-Thivars, "your dearest dream, since you dream, Princess, would be, I am going to tell you, would be to have a tobacco-shop where you could sell brandy at the bar."

"He's guessed it!" cried the woman, taking for the last time her pipe from her mouth, and rushing to kiss Balzac, who pushed her away, saying, "In the morning, I don't like the smell of jasmine."

We congratulated Balzac upon his divination — but I must add, not to diminish his rare powers of observation — that he was almost sure to guess correctly with eyes shut, on all possible occasions, that a tobacco-shop is the supreme desire of almost all women, beginning with the colonel's widow, ending with the doorkeeper's widow, in the last house in the Fabourg Saint-Marceau. Balzac himself thought too much about tobacco-shops for I know one promise of his to obtain a tobacco-shop for someone from which he had great trouble to release himself.

"Gentlemen," said M. Brissot-Thivars, "the rats await us."

"Don't let us make those gentlemen await us any longer," added Balzac, "they deserve all our consideration. — Let us go to the rats!"

We all rose, and we went to see the rats eat the horse reserved for their gluttony, and for us as the crowning stroke of the party given us by Montfaucon.

Through spongy ground, rendered still softer by the heavy rains which had been falling for several days, we went to the part of the establishment where the spectacle was awaiting us.

The setting for our night's adventure was a setting less rich, less sumptuously costumed, less fairy-like, of course, than that of the Jewess or the Huguenots, but nevertheless of a character which corresponded harmoniously with the eccentricity of the drama prepared for us, which was soon to be enacted under our eyes during the last hour of the night.

Twelve men of the place, each carrying in his right hand a lighted torch of resin, and with a long ladder upon his left shoulder, walked before us with a somewhat mysterious care; four others carrying only ladders followed us with the same conspirator's silence. It is probably night which gives that Catilinian touch to any enterprise it veils. However, we must not have been a very gay sight in the darkness, with our flaming torches. I was thinking about Samblancay, led in the same way between torches, to be hung in that same Montfaucon, in the reign of good Francis the First, and for the good pleasure of his excellent mother, Madame d'-Angoulême. We were at exactly the place where the gallows on which he was hung by Lieutenant Maillard had stood. The only thing missing was the crows, and it was not long before we heard them.

Beside us walked dogs the colour of night; they

had, as shall be seen, other reasons for accompanying us besides their usual habit of never leaving their masters. It was from the numerous family of those dogs, from their ferocious tribes that the gladiator dogs came of, who, twice a week, fought with other dogs no less ferocious than they, in the spectacles, copied from the Romans, at the Bloody Barriere du Combat; so terrible, so murderous, that the police, in suppressing those fights, suppressed the dogs at the same time, despite the tender claims of all the butchers of Paris outskirts. And it was doubly right. There are today only a few of them left, almost useless; since they don't kill anyone any more, and they don't kill each other.

Those who came with us were watch-dogs and bull-dogs coming from a breed very carefully trained, of most renowned English and Saxon breeds; square heads, angular, short ears, prominent and bloody eyes, iron teeth, burnt noses, dirty-yellow hair, strong flanks, and elephant paws. Some of them, at the formidable barrier games, have been seen to burst open the chest of a bull, and torn open by horns, break, before dying, the neck of a donkey.

Such were our scouts, our chosen guard. If one of them went away from the line, a strong kick brought him quickly back; but, however quick to obey, they only did it after showing a range of teeth ready to eat their mentor, as if they wanted to make him understand, through this white and silent grin, that

they only accepted correction as a kind of caress, as a simple, friendly game. If a mad rage, such as they often feel, had turned those dogs against us, we would have been torn apart, killed in five minutes, guides and spectators both.

But we had reached a circular wall, or almost circular, because nothing in that place showed a perfect form, a well thought out design; none of the objects had anything about them of ordinary reality. Thus, the ground had the inconsistency of a sponge; mud the lightness of water, water the thickness of mud; the elevations which covered the ground were as deceptive as sand; the houses of the guards and the employés had the unsteady drunkenness of stones badly put up; the five lakes enclosed in the establishment had the desolate aspect of five large puddles; and the only way to breathe was to keep one's breath back.

The ladders were laid against the wall, and after a steep ascent, our twelve torch-bearers and ourselves crowned the top of the wall.

We were looking into a vast enough enclosure, where the horses condemned to be killed were taken. Several heaps of bones, here and there, showed their funereal destination. We had to have a few minutes to think, to accustom our eyes to see the peculiarities, few enough, it is true, of the place. The bottom of the badly paved vat was torn by the lines of several trenches in Portland cement leading to the edge

of the wall, and each of those long and irregular trenches ended with a grating, put there, I assume, to stop any solid thing and to let only blood pass. The blood was then carried subterraneously towards a lake, a real lake where one could canoe. That expression, *a lake of blood,* ceased to be a metaphor. There was a lake, banks, waves and barcarolles. A lake of strange beauty, such as Nero, the great scarlet poet, would have dreamt of.

We were still waiting on the top of our wall. The curtain was about to go up!

An iron gate opened in the thickness of the wall; and four men entered at once into the enclosure, pulling after them, with ropes, the dead horse, the hero of the party, the principal actor whom we were expecting with beating hearts. When they had released him quickly from all his fetters, that poor creature, which had had so many since its birth; and at what a moment was he freed from them! — to give him the freedom of death — when they had left him bare upon the stones, they went away and closed behind them the iron grating. The overture had been played, the play was beginning.

Through all the open gratings of the trenches, and without doubt, through many hidden air-holes, at once appeared a few rats, drawn by the immense feast. They were the sharpshooters. Several, leaving that first squad, rose on their paws a few yards away

from the beast, and there they turned in one movement, their pointed noses and their sensitive whiskers towards the gratings through which they had come, to insure, if need be, a way to retreat. The prudence of the serpent has been spoken of; that prudence is as false as the modesty of violets; nothing is less prudent than the serpent, who rattles, springs, and uses all sorts of ways to betray its presence; nothing is less humble than the violet, the first of the flowers to appear after winter and the last to go away in the autumn, if it ever goes away. But a rat's prudence! That's the animal against which innumerable traps have been laid ever since it emerged from the Ark, which good Noah ought not to have let it enter, and it is the animal which has multiplied the most upon the earth.

Let us go on with the epic of Montfaucon.

Their first shy impulses disappeared when they saw themselves surrounded by other rats taking part in the sport. The first to arrive encouraged the others and the pavement began to be covered with them. Balzac, with a witty quickness, pointed out to us that, among the rats there was progression in strength and size, from the first to the last, or rather from the first to the following, as the last were far from having arrived. Those which had shown up first, thin, elongated, sickly-looking, had been followed by others of a more generous size, which, in

their turn, had been followed by still bigger ones, a graduated procession which he explained by a greater hunger in the first than in the ones that had followed. Broadening his reasoning, Balzac still from their looks and ways, gave them a social position, explaining their sizes by health and personal position. As they showed up, Balzac said to us: "Here is a bailiff's clerk earning twenty francs a month, without breakfast. — Here is an employee in the finance ministry. Ah, that one is a clerk who earns twelve hundred francs: he is less thin. — That one has two thousand francs, but he has vices. — Here is a chief: he is getting portly. — Here is a well-to-do capitalist: he is bald." It is understood that this physiological description did not last long; what observation would have sufficed for the indefinite multiplicity of the newcomers? The pavement of the yard was soon to disappear, it was disappearing very quickly under a carpet of rats; black rats, tawny ones, yellow ones, brown ones, grey, ash-grey, bluish ones, even white rats — the deans. Before it was altogether covered, we saw leaving the mass of rats a squadron of more adventurous, fearless rats. They formed three columns, triangular ones, towards the dead horse, which they surrounded. It was as if the reconnoitring military party had succeeded. Then, the other reassured, went forward much more resolutely. There was a general move, the division advanced; and while

those I have just talked about climbed over the swollen sides of the horse and were busy tearing his hide from end to end, as a tailor takes old clothes to pieces, hundreds, thousands, millions of rats came through all the openings, but in droves, quickly, frightened, like panic-stricken spectators trying to get out from a theatre on fire. They climbed over each other, and their movements, and their shrill whistlings, not audible at first, produced slowly, as they increased, the noise of a crowd, a murmur from which came cries almost human. It was because life was humming in that animated mass. The ground was soon covered by half-a-foot of their flesh in ferment. I shiver to think what would have happened if any of us had fallen into that . . . The jackals would not have devoured quicker.

"Isn't it beautiful?" cried the witty M. Brissot-Thivars with pride, "like Carter before his menagerie; isn't it beautiful?"

"Magnificent!" answered Balzac, saluting him with his hand; "magnificent! Are those your lions?"

"As you say, my lions. Do you hear them roar?"

"I do hear them roar. A good roar, Montfaucon!"

"Do you know," went on M. Brissot-Thivars, pointing to the innumerable legion of those fearful

destroyers under our eyes, " do you know that, if, one day, for a cause which it is not chimerical to imagine, those hordes of rats came on Paris, a whole part would be devoured or seriously damaged! "

" Really? " asked Balzac, delighted to know of this danger to which Paris was exposed.

" Nothing is truer. A movement in the soil after a storm might be the cause of the upheaval."

" Paris invaded by the rats of Montfaucon! What a spectacle! Could not one try it? " said Balzac, delighted with his idea; " give ourselves the spectacle of a dress rehearsal of a pleasure that perhaps only our descendants will have? If we did without the storm . . . if we ourselves were to bring about that upheaval of which you spoke, my dear Inspector? . . ."

" You would want me, who am charged to protect Paris against all Montfaucon's eventualities, to aid in such a plot . . . oh! "

" Such a sensation! It is very tempting! Can you see, through seven or eight barriers, marching upon Paris, troops of rats, two yards deep, walking over the employés of octroi and invading twenty districts still asleep? What an awakening! Quickly the dealers close their shops which they were about to open; the cabs, whose horses run away, run towards the Seine, to put the river between them and those hordes of new Attilas; the caretakers look at each other, frightened, upon the threshold of their houses,

whose bases have disappeared under the waves of the living tide."

"Think now of the Opera quarter attacked in its turn. I can imagine the astonishment of the ladies in the Rue de la Victoire, Provence, Helder and Saint-Lazare, to whom their maids come crying: 'Let us get away, get away! — but what is the matter? . . . Have the police? . . . Have coarse bailiffs? . . . Nothing like that! the house is full of rats. — Rats? — Yes, ladies, rats; they have devoured the concierge and three pianos; they are in the hall; do you hear them? — Let us flee! My horses! My horses! — They have been devoured, Madame. — Let us jump through the window! Impossible, the rats are in the street and tearing it up.'"

"You are joking, dear M. de Balzac; the disasters caused by their invasion doubtless would be less original, but nevertheless real; don't you know? . . ."

"I am not joking!" interrupted Balzac, "and I know that Edinburgh, in the XVIIIth Century, was almost devoured, not precisely by rats, but by bedbugs. Two thirds of the town had to be demolished to save the remaining third. And so, a town might very well be devoured by rats, when another was devoured by bedbugs, and many others in Africa by locusts. Only I would rather be eaten by locusts than by rats, and especially by bedbugs, if I could

choose my guests. But what a title for a chapter in a novel: '*How in one day a whole quarter of Paris was devoured by rats.*'"

"Hush!" said Doctor Gentil, "the great dissection begins."

The doctor was right: the rats of Montfaucon had torn the horse open, and were cutting it apart, reducing it to bits; a work of destruction that a few moments later we were not allowed to see, for the horse had completely disappeared under the hideous rodents, who, clinging with the voracity of leeches to its round body, offered us soon the spectacle of a second horse formed by a thousand rats, composed of all that hair and moving paws, and what a noise they made! We could hear the clashing of teeth; the noise of forks came up to us. Some of those rodents seemed to me as big as cats. But what cat would have dared to compete with such adversaries? It would have been swallowed as quickly as a partridge by a fox; it would have been eaten up in a jiffy. You'll see in a minute whether I am exaggerating.

"Now!" said M. Brissot-Thivars to one of his men who, from the top of the wall, was lighting this scene with his resin torch.

At this order from the chief, the chosen man threw his torch into the arena, and it fell a short distance away from where the jackals of Montfaucon were having their murderous feast. Fire fell

upon all those Luculluses; that gathering flame was the only thing strong enough to get the expected results. A cry rose as from little children being choked, and a small reddish flame came up in a spiral. There was a hole in the moving mass, at the place where the melted resin had fallen. At the bottom of that hole we saw a skeleton: it was that of the horse which had completely disappeared.

In the cavities, cells and compartments, some overfed rats had lodged themselves; some had gone to sleep, just as drinkers tired by drunkenness go to sleep under the tables of the saloon. They were drunk with horseflesh.

"*Now get the dogs in!*"

"Why, is there more to come!" cried Balzac, who had not lost any of the rare new pleasures of observation afforded by this very unusual spectacle, by which we were still quite moved, terrified and stunned.

The dogs entered the arena and the big slaughter began. The first few minutes were beautiful for them. They twisted necks, broke ribs, and crushed heads by the hundred. They were delirious. They killed, they barked; they barked, they killed; they did both at the same time, like good huntsmen. The male and the female often fell under the same bite. And when they thought them dead, our huge brave dogs shook them about like empty gloves, as they often do, indeed, for play when they are very small;

then they threw them away, and began the massacre all over again. They swam in murder as much as they liked — no, as much as they were able to. There is no voluptuousness without an end! We soon saw their exaltation diminish and their cruelty give way to clemency, a clemency which was, of course, only disguised fatigue. And yet, if they had killed a great deal, they had not destroyed the ferocious jaguars of Montfaucon. The first quarter of an hour had been theirs, the second more even. We heard barks that were less like cries of victory than cries of pain. The reaction was beginning. We saw many bleeding ears, we saw many dogs' muzzles, hitherto respected, to which bunches of rats were clinging, rats eating their enemies. No shaking removed them, they did not go away, they clung so firmly, that I saw some muzzles absolutely torn off. And how many others ran away, howling, dragging a wounded paw! how many were stiff! The remainder, of course, were valiantly defending themselves, but they were defending. The position had changed. Chance would have turned against the dogs, if their masters, frightened by the danger, and also to put the climax to the feast, had not opened the grating, and with bare arms, armed with heavy sticks, had not rushed to the center of the uncertain melee, caught at the supreme moment of crisis which would change victory into defeat, or defeat into victory. What an immense joy this reinforcement

was for the dogs. They suddenly recaptured their first energy. If they had known Greek, they would not have needed to use it to cry: *God gave us back light, and fight against us!* The light had come back naturally; it was daylight. The torches were not needed to see what was going on. Although pale and grey, the dawn permitted us to distinguish objects clearly.

The fight started again. The men were wonderful; both the men and dogs were, to tell the truth. Each time the sticks fell they sent flocks of rats scurrying; they looked like partridges. The dogs which caught them as they passed, completed the illusion.

What a beautiful fight! How they attacked, how they defended themselves! Blood was pouring. Desperate, exasperated, the rats jumped up on the dogs' backs, climbed up on the men, ran into their beards, around their necks, their legs, their shoulders, heaved, whistled, stuck, clung to the sticks and bit the wood hard enough to lose their teeth. I saw some running to the wall and breaking their heads, unwilling to surrender, angrily committing suicide — rats worthy of antiquity! Naturally, men won the victory, but it cost them dear. A sword fight with other men would not have reduced them to such a state. Sweat and blood were pouring over their foreheads.

The feast was over.

"What a drama!" said the inspector of public hygiene to Balzac.

"You call that a drama!" cried de Balzac, delighted with his night's pleasure; "call it a poem, and you won't even be near the truth!"

Balzac wrote neither a drama nor a poem about that visit to Montfaucon, but he remembered it profitably later, when he wrote one of his best Droll Stories: The Sermon of the Merry Vicar of Meudon. Diane de Poitiers, under the guise of a mouse, is described with great charm, in the delightful piece in which Henri II is represented as another too voluptuous mouse.

PART FIVE

PART FIVE

IT WAS in the middle of summer; I even believe that we were almost at the end of the summer of 1844. Yes, it was in 1844. Balzac lived then in the fantastic house of the Rue Basse, in Passy.

On a stifling day, stifling as only Paris in September can be, as fearfully hot as the middle of the Sahara desert, Balzac invited me to go to his lovely house in Passy, very lovely, of course, but stuck like the nest of an eagle to the perilous sides of a mountain. A steep ascent which gives me palpitation of the heart and makes me perspire at the mere thought of having attempted it. After the barrier, and crookedly placed between the high walls which hold the mountain of Passy, a small street so steep, with such fantastic corners, so deformed . . . that it was a real pilgrimage. Balzac often took that dreadful road, which had a very bad reputation, when he did not want to meet any bores. Nothing was so amusing, from the top — friendly cruelty — to see him toiling and moiling, breathing as heavily as an ox in the sun, his knees bent from the

difficulties of the passage. We often gave ourselves, Madame X . . . and I, the pleasure of *bélvéder,* looking at him from our high observatory, when he had promised to come to lunch, and when he was only two or three hours late.

That day I followed the Seine, hoping to steal some breeze from it. I did not have the least breath. What a furnace! The Cours la Reine was as yellow as corn straw. And there was a fine corrosive dust mixed with that fiery atmosphere. The compensation awaiting me at Passy had to be very great to make me forget my journey in such a stifling heat. It was beyond all imaginable compensations, but I would have consented to endure twenty such fatigues to enjoy the surprise that Balzac had arranged for me on that day.

It was about half-past seven when I entered the dining-room, decorated, by his bust, the masterpiece of David, worthy of a Florentine or Venetian gallery; a Titian painted with a chisel, a marble Van Dyck. That pleasing room of which I have already spoken, looked upon the garden and communicated with his study.

Balzac was finishing his dinner: he had on his right an editor of the *Presse,* M. Robert, who had come to ask him for a further installment of the *Peasants,* which that paper was then publishing; on his left, Madame X . . . was pouring the coffee, and opposite him a man with a bovine face, a wide

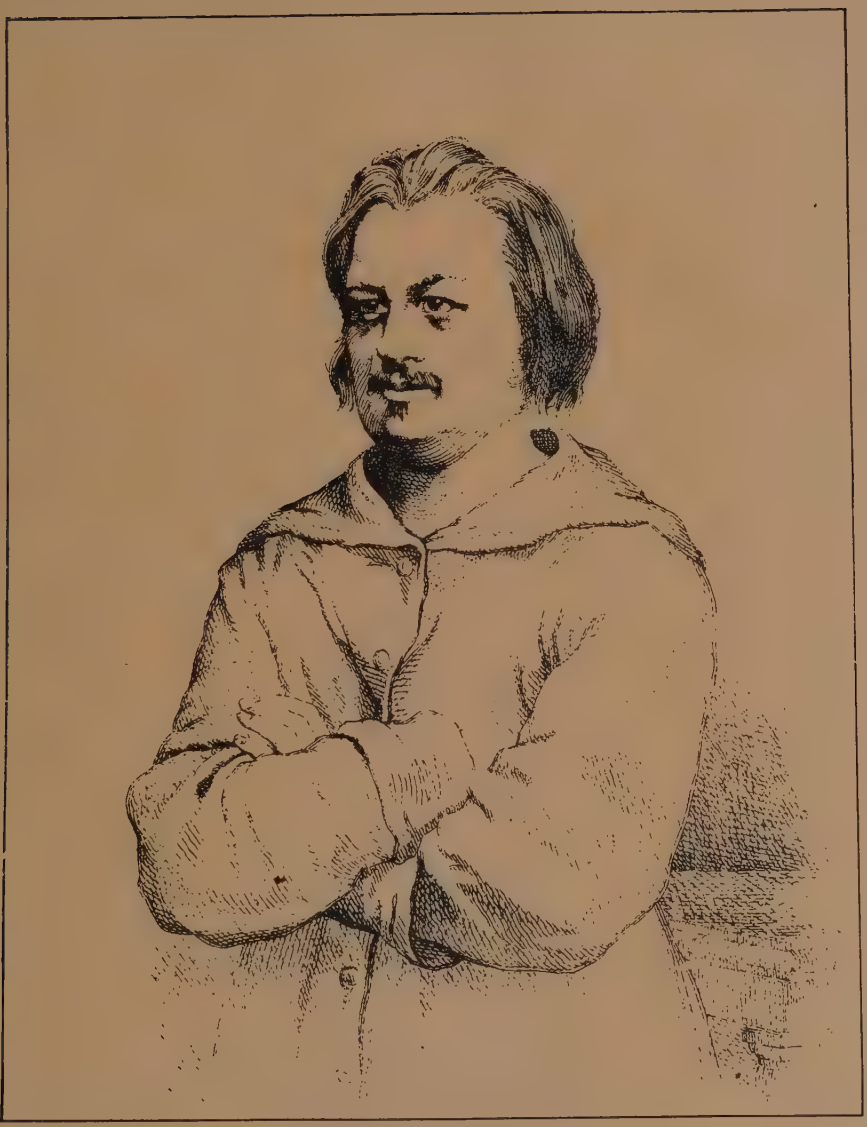
forehead, bestial towards the base, solid, disquieting, of a strange character; hair that had been red, but now white; eyes once blue, but winter grey today. A complex ensemble, rustic and yet subtle, with an expression hard to define in a word, in a sentence even; calm, however, but calm in the fearful manner of Egyptian sphinxes. There were claws somewhere. I must say here that the man posed so cleverly, during the whole evening, his Herculean body, but like Hercules after the twelve labours, tired and bent, during all the time he spent at Balzac's that day, that it was impossible for me to see his face long enough to remember clearly his features, to be able to group them and to describe them later.

Neither by the light of day, which had already declined considerably, it is true, when I was introduced, nor by the light of the lamps which were soon brought, did this face reveal itself frankly to my gaze. I only saw a quarter of it. Whether there was only chance in that, or whether he willed it so, I do not know; but from one cause or another, his face eluded me constantly, without, however, any apparent attempt on his part to escape my examination. Who was this man? With a simple movement of his hands, which appeared very beautifully moulded to me, of a rare suppleness and authority, which he moved with the coquetry of a woman, and which he also let fall with the royal authority of a

tiger's paws; it was by their simple movements, that he was able to escape all analysis on my part. Sometimes they met upon his forehead, like a man trying to prevent his memory from escaping, and then his face was half-hidden; sometimes he placed one or the other of them like a screen above his eyebrows, to protect his eyes from the too bright light, or else he crossed them in repose over his mouth, as is done in moments of deep attention. And an extraordinary influence of his personality I felt, long before Balzac had introduced me to his guest, I felt that he filled the space in which we were with his translucent power: in a word, one felt — at least, I did — that there was not only the weight of one star overwhelmingly intelligent in the place where we were, but besides Balzac there was another star also exerting the force of gravitation.

While digging his fingers in a big Montreuil peach which he was getting ready for his boars' teeth, Balzac looked with a satisfied glance at the man who was unknown to me, and said: "Let me introduce M. Vidocq."

At the mention of this name famous in the history of the police, I remembered having seen him at La Vautrin in the alleys of *Les Jardies*, but Balzac had never introduced me, or told me who the mysterious man was. As I had learned to respect all his reserves and his lightest secrets, a sure means of avoiding any coldness between us, I had



PORTRAIT OF BALZAC

not asked him who the visitor was with whom I had rubbed elbows under his roof. Now he judged it was time to remove the spell; I could only rejoice. The hero was certainly worth knowing because of all the noise made about him, because of all the important affairs of the secret police which he had conducted with the penetration of a genius and often resolved with knightly audacity. Balzac, and he certainly was right in this, esteemed very highly those privileged talents committed to the watching of society and public security. He admired above all the divination of those subtle minds, which have the keen flair of the savage in following the trail of a criminal upon the most fragile induction or even without any. A voice speaks to them. They are seized by a nervous tremor like the hydroscope upon the rock which covers a sheet of water a hundred feet deep, and they cry: "The crime is there, dig, it is there!"

Balzac himself loved to boast of that rare intuition. And how many proofs he gave that he possessed it to a high degree, by making us follow step by step the most hidden passions of the human heart, by leading us through labyrinth after labyrinth to the heart itself, that cavern where all counterfeit monies are made, where all conspiracies are hatched, where all crimes are prepared, before entering the realm of reality, to be studied then by other moralists, the great geniuses of police,

the Lenoirs, the Colquhouns, the Parent-Duchâtelets, and, in another sphere, the Vidocqs!

Coffee was served by the beautiful plump hands of Madame X. . . . We talked a little more before the candles were lit. As they were placed upon the table, M. Robert rose to go, and Balzac rose also and accompanied him, after giving him a very untidy parcel, made up of manuscripts and galley proofs, which he removed from the big open pockets of his coat of grey linen, which he generally wore in summer.

At the door of the room they stopped to talk. Balzac, who held M. Robert in great esteem, loved to consult him, to acquaint him, in familiar confidences, with all his miserable trials as a writer, particularly with all the annoyances he had to put up with in his relations with the paper *La Presse*. His prodigious talent and his immense popularity did not protect him from the intimate betrayals of that paper. He had good friends there who betrayed him with delight to the chiefs. The good, adorable Madame de Girardin was not always powerful enough herself to help the tottering credit of Balzac, to maintain the authority of his name and to cause to prevail over honourable eunuchs the virility of his beautiful creations. The silkworm which wove his gold net had spiders which pretended they could weave too. The author of the *Les Lis dans la Vallée* was thought too diffuse, too prosy, an interminable

anatomist too much interested in furnishings, an excessive appraiser, never dramatic enough, thinking of volume only; the subscribers in the provinces were complaining, and when the subscribers complain, one has to give in, better still, go down on one's knees, roll one's head in the dust, obey. It was only too true that time, however, that the subscribers of Saint-Jean-de-Coq-en-Brie-sous-Bois and of Saint-Paul-en-Jarret had complained about the novel of Balzac then running; *Les Paysans*. They threatened to stop their subscriptions if they were given, in daily portions, that dull novel of M. de Balzac's which they did not understand at all, which interested them much less, they said, than the *Femme aux yeux verts*, published at the same time by the rival newspaper. Give us a few women with green eyes, cried the subscribers of Saint-Jean-de-Coq-en-Brie-sous-Bois and those of Saint-Paul-en-Jarret, and save us from the continuation of your awful, dull and disgusting peasants.

Those repeated protestations ended by reaching their aim; the board of the *Presse*, rightly or wrongly, was excited. Every day, through letter or messenger, Balzac was asked to modify, to cut, above all, to cut a lot from *Les Paysans*, that new and colossal study of manners, in the manner Molière, in which he described so admirably those sly, cunning rogues, the men of the fields. And poor Balzac cut, but never enough. They spoke resolutely

of suspending publication if he did not resign himself to greater sacrifices. Such was the state of friendly relations between the *Presse* and Balzac at that time; such was his own situation as a writer, and he talked almost aloud about it to M. Robert, as he saw him to the door, so much did his sore heart overflow.

When the conversation was ended, Balzac came back to the table; he was smiling, but his gaiety appeared forced to me, and I doubted very much if Vidocq, with his eagle eyes, had not remarked the false peace of our host. Balzac, after drinking a big glass of Chateau-du-Pape, a kind of black and heavy wine which he liked very much, said to the great man of the police: "You were saying, Monsieur Vidocq . . . ?"

"I was saying, Monsieur de Balzac, that you go to a lot of trouble to create stories of the other world, when reality is here under your eyes, near your ears, under your hand."

"So you believe in reality! You delight me. I would not have believed you could be so naïve. Reality! talk to me about it: you have just come back from that beautiful country. We make reality."

"No, Monsieur de Balzac."

"Yes, Monsieur Vidocq; you see, the true reality is this beautiful peach from Montreuil. The one you would call real, you, that one grows naturally, in the forest, on the wild peach-tree. Well! that one

is nothing, it is small, bitter, sour, impossible to eat. But here is the real peach, the one I hold, which has been cultivated for a hundred years, which has been obtained through cuttings here and there, through transplantation in dry or light ground, some kind of grafting; the one one eats, which perfumes one's mouth and heart. That exquisite peach, we made it, it is the only real one. Same thing with me. I get reality in my novels, as Montreuil gets reality in his peaches. I am a gardener of books."

Vidocq poured some brandy slowly into his coffee and, for answer, waved the cup before his nose.

"You are not convinced, I see, my dear Monsieur Vidocq; but every time people have told me: 'Monsieur de Balzac, I have a magnificent subject for a novel; you'll make a masterpiece out of it'—I have found nothing worth while. . . . When the fact was there the details which are everything, the details were totally lacking, when, on the contrary, they brought me pretty details, very gay, very appetizing, enough to make one lick one's chops, as my compatriot Rabelais said, the subject did not exist. It is the story of Montreuil's peach, of the Chasselas grapes from Fontainebleau and the Bon-Chrétien pear. They are made, they don't grow naturally."

Vidocq, holding his cup in the air after having half emptied it, in such a way as to show only one eye between the handle and the curve of the cup,

answered: "Yes, sometimes reality comes of itself."

"Never! never! never!"

"But yes! Monsieur de Balzac, but yes!"

Vidocq's eyes, like the lens of glasses, met the dazzled and dazzling eyes of Balzac. Those two suns took fire.

The following words fell from Vidocq's heavy lips:

"I am bringing you a Montreuil peach."

"You?"

"I."

"Only you, of course, who could . . . But no, not even you. I have on that point the fanaticism of conviction. . . ."

"I am bringing you a fact."

"A complete one?"

"Complete, absolutely! A story."

"With two legs, heart and head?"

"Yes, with heart, legs and the rest."

"Ah, and the rest also?"

"Yes, passions and all."

Something mocking, not precisely cynical, as the conversation between two soul surgeons would lead one to suppose, ran over the half-closed eyelashes of Vidocq, and landed like sparks in the eyeballs of his small grey eyes.

Madame X . . . started as if to leave the table.

"Oh, you can remain, Madame," said Vidocq

with a smile which, if it would not have been reassuring for a young girl's modesty was very sufficient for the place and the circumstances. Besides, like all superior people who have reached in one way or another the calm of the heights, Vidocq had, before the world and when he was out of his profession, an exactitude of speech and oratory. He was master of himself and of others. I could say about him what masons say about a man of their trade whose specialty they want to recommend: He is in the building business. Vidocq, like Balzac, was of the building.

"I was on duty that night at the police station," said Vidocq, beginning, "and I can tell you that that winter night was as cold as this summer night is warm. The Seine was frozen, and an icy moon gave you shivers only from looking at its whiteness upon the pavements, upon the walls and the windows, where there weren't many flies. My colleagues and I had gathered around an iron stove, heated to white heat, which shrieked like a damned soul, as we filled it up with coal, without pity for the budget. We were cooking chestnuts, and we washed them down by glasses of white wine, cut with the blessed cellar water, that is to say, rum. It is wonderful for gout and recommended by the Faculty of Bercy. But it is unbelievable the quantity of chestnuts one eats at police headquarters in winter to pass the time away. One smokes a lot too. If it

were not for that, what could one do, from eight in the morning till eight at night, in the waiting-rooms, where M. le Préfet always wants you within reach? There can't be any sleep! He himself always sleeps with one eye open. Think of it! Twenty reports a minute reach him; reports on fires, thefts, suicides, murders, conspiracies. He jumps out of bed and rings. At once one must be in front of him for orders. 'You, go there; you, there; and you, there.' And quickly one puts on a blouse or a frock coat, a wig; one sticks on one's chin a fair or black beard, white or grey, and one goes to work where one is told. As I have already told you that night we were stuffing ourselves with chestnuts."

"Well, you did nothing except eat chestnuts all night?" Balzac interrupted in a bad humor.

"No, wait. It was only half-past twelve; there was a long time till daylight."

"All right, let us eat some chestnuts," said Balzac resignedly; "but let us soon have done with them, please?"

Accustomed to those fits of impatience, born in Balzac by an extreme curiosity, Vidocq was not vexed more than he was by all those that followed, and he went on:

"It was the night of December 14, 1834 or 35 . . . that's nine or ten years ago. . . . So many facts go through my head . . ."

"And through your hands?"

"And through my hands, that my memory is not always safe; but it was not later than 36, of that I am sure."

"All right; but what happened at half-past twelve at police headquarters?"

"It was almost one; I believe, as a matter of fact, that one o'clock had just struck at the Quai des Orfèvres, when I saw passing behind the misty panes of the glass door of my office, which opened, perhaps I did not tell you, upon the stairs leading to the chief's office, two shadows, two moving objects, whom I thought were women. I rose; they were women. I opened the door, and I asked them where they were going. The lady answered me shortly, and without looking at me, without stopping, that she wanted to speak to M. le Préfet. I say the lady, because it was easy to see that the other, the one who was accompanying her, was her inferior, her companion or her maid. She wore a black silk dress, it is true; but by her hat without feathers or flowers, and especially by the way her shawl was thrown over her shoulders, one could easily see she was the maid. Besides, even if the other had not worn evening dress, one would have guessed her to be the mistress. That evening dress embarrassed me a lot. What could a lady dressed in that fashion, dressed, I must tell you, grotesquely, what could a lady like that want one hour after midnight from the chief of police? The flowers were stuck carelessly in her

hair, her hair hardly seemed to have been combed, and behind her rouge (because she had put rouge on, although she was very young and marvellously pretty) one could see a cadaverous pallor. Does one say *cadaverous* or *cadeveric,* Monsieur de Balzac? "

"Say what you like. I don't care!"

"Neither do I! By the way, when will you be a member of the French Académie?"

"When the places of men of genius and wit are not taken by professors and politicians. Let us speak of nobler things; let us return to the police."

Vidocq went on, after pouring more rum into his rum:

"And, a thing which appeared to me more extraordinary than that unexplainable evening dress on that unhappy woman, showing signs of madness or of some overpowering emotion, was that she was wearing a black shoe on one foot and a satin slipper on the other. I was about to tell her that one did not enter thus the chief's room at such a time of night, when precisely at that instant, his apartment's door opened, and the usher who is on duty all night in the hall let her enter. The door was closed behind her, so the maid remained upon the landing. I asked her to come into the room where my subordinates were, whom I had left around the stove. She consented.

"To tell the truth, although her attire was not so extravagant as that of her mistress, her morale

did not seem to be any better. Accompanying the few words she used to answer my offer I noticed trembling which was due not only to the cold. In our profession we are accustomed to distinguish all emotions, so as not to confuse remorse with fear. There was only fear in that young woman, but a fear strong enough to make one afraid, a fear such as I have never seen in anyone in my life, except in her mistress. It was enough to frighten one. And yet I could see that she was of an energetic nature, strong and firmly resolute. The events which brought them to police headquarters were considerable. From her drawling accent I judged she came from Belgium, Antwerp, or Ostend; she was as enormous as her mistress was fine and delicate, although her mistress was as dark as she was. Then Spanish eyes and a huge Dutch mouth. And so fresh! I have studied races; I never make a mistake about race. It is our profession which gives us that ability, or rather develops it. There is no good detective without that faculty. If I had your able pen, Monsieur de Balzac, I would write things which would turn the world upside down, about the genius which is lodged in the head, in the blood vessels of real men born to be detectives. Here I am, for example, I was born for that. My nose is split like the nose of hunting dogs. You also, you have a split nose. We smell from afar."

Balzac smiled at the compliment, at the honor

of being admitted to the comradeship of split noses.

"Put me in a crowd of a thousand individuals and I'll find a galley-slave from the smell only. Those who have lived in Brest or Toulon acquire a scent which I recognize upon them after twenty years. It comes to me like the perfume of roses."

"The rose of the hulks. That's pretty, we'll give her a place beside the tea-rose."

"And I have many other instincts," went on Vidocq. "When I get up in the morning I can foresee whether I will be knifed during the day by one of those charming people whom I have been instrumental in putting away. It depends a lot on the weather. There is no barometer so good as I am. Some days I am so stupid that I could be arrested by a rural policeman in the Rue Saint-Denis; but on others, to make up . . ."

"How did you feel that night?" asked Balzac; "the night when that beautiful lady dared to go to the hotel on the Rue de Jérusalem?"

"In pretty good form," answered Vidocq with mock humility, and I think I proved it that same night; but, however, I saw nothing, I discovered nothing, I guessed nothing behind the terror of the maid, whom I had asked to sit down near the stove and in the best armchair in the room, to watch her better."

"Why did you not ask her questions?"

"The deuce! how you go on! Ask her questions! I had no right to do so. It was the chief's business, and only the chief's, in the present circumstances. And then what this woman had on her mind prevented her from remaining quiet. Every second she rose, went to the window, and then, with the tip of the badly gloved finger of her right hand, badly gloved as when one is in a hurry to go out on some pressing business, she brushed away the fog of steam condensed upon the panes by the cold, and through that place, cleared for an instant, she looked. What was she looking at? I followed her to know. She stretched her uneasy eyes every time towards the Quai des Orfèvres, where the carriage which had brought her with her mistress was waiting, a few steps from police headquarters. It was neither a cab, nor a rented carriage, but a solid and rich carriage of a noble family, which was easily recognizable by the horses, the crystal lights and the general appearance of the outfit. Was the maid anxious because she feared the carriage might go away? Was there someone in that carriage waiting for the outcome of the night visit made to the chief of police, by those two frightened ladies? That's what I was unable to fathom, and the darkness became still darker for me when I heard the maid, who did not think me so near her, murmur in an undescribable accent, her eyes fixed upon the coachman of that carriage: '*He sleeps!*'

"Now, what feeling of security or fright could express the convulsive movement of her lips, that's a question which needed more time for a solution than I had before me. Also there were important events going on in the prefect's apartment, much more important than those I am telling you in passing, and that I am mentioning rather so that you may miss none of the events of that exciting night rather than to keep your attention.

"Now, let us see what was going on in the apartments of the prefect, who had gone to bed at midnight, after a day of exceptionally hard and fatiguing work, and after having expressly ordered the usher on duty to respect his rest, and to let him sleep till daylight, in a word not to trouble his sleep under any pretext whatsoever. When he happened to give such orders, it was absolutely unthinkable that the orders should be violated; because the orders were not less than a question, I won't say, of life and death, but of health or illness for the magistrate who puts them up as an impassable barrier of his sleep. I am very strong, am I not? Few men, I believe, can resist the heavy work night and day which I have often done, well, I declare that that work is all play compared to the occupations, cares, immense responsibilities of a prefect who has charge of the Paris police. I don't know how one can resist for more than six months that awful and wearing position, especially during our time of revolutions,

uprisings, conspiracies, and secret societies. When everything is asleep at night — because after all night is made for a little sleep — when everything sleeps, royalty, justice, the army, the people, laws, manners, he alone must watch, because his mission is to say every instant to society: I am here, I am watching for you; to be able to tell justice: Wake, laws are in danger. A police prefect is king of Paris from sunset till sunrise.

"Rather astonished that the watch and the porter of the hotel had made no difficulty at letting the two women enter, the usher asked, rubbing his eyes, the motive which brought her to the apartments of the chief. She answered in a voice charged with the violent emotion which brought her to such a place at such an hour, and by the rapidity of her ascent of the stairs, that she wanted to speak immediately to the Prefect: and she went, without waiting for an answer, to the door behind which she supposed, and rightly, was the apartment where she would find him. The usher on duty stopped her and told her first that the Prefect only saw people on a certain day of the week, and then only by appointment; that, at night, his office was only opened for reasons he alone could judge; and that, in addition, he had given orders that no one should enter before eight o'clock in the morning. 'Eight in the morning!' the lady then cried, wringing her hands, while she tapped the floor with her foot hard

enough to break her heel; — 'Eight in the morning!' She had to see the Prefect instantly, she had to speak to him; an affair of the gravest import was at stake. Blasé as all ushers are about that pretext used so often of '*affairs of the gravest import,*' to which all visitors have recourse to gain access to a public functionary, Father Caron — that was the name of the usher on duty, that day — answered that he was very sorry to refuse, but that he could not allow himself to violate his orders. His disgrace would be sure after such an infraction, and all promotion would be impossible. In the same quick and convulsive tones which she had been using and which she could not tone down, the distressed lady told Father Caron that, when the Prefect knew, once she had been allowed in his apartment, what the motive of her extraordinary visit was, extraordinary, without doubt, but perfectly justified, instead of punishing him, he would be grateful, he would thank him. And the beautiful lady ended her new supplication by a second attempt to force entrance into the Prefect's room, an impulsiveness again repressed by the iron arm of the usher, very much surprised, he told me since, by the strength of that young woman, so weak in appearance, whose noble and commanding glances, he added, seemed much more than her unbelievable physical strength to force him to give in. Nevertheless, he did not give in that time; he con-

fined himself, in his flurry, because he was beginning to be flurried before a will which did not yield an inch to the statement that she was asking for the impossible, the utterly impossible. He even begged her to go away.

"She smiled at this request of the usher, and she said to him, as if she had not heard his last sentence, that what she was expecting from him was quite possible, indeed, extremely possible, because she was well-known to the Prefect of Police; that she had dined with him, not more than ten days ago, at the Général de Rumigny; that she had been the week before at a soirée with him at the home of M. le Comte de Montalivet; she named many other distinguished people at whose homes she had met M. le Préfet. She asserted in every way she could that she was privately and intimately acquainted with him, and added that she had come to inform him of an event of which he alone was to know, and to know without delay, an extraordinary event, unheard of, fearful. He had to be awakened, he had to receive her and listen to her.

"To all her reasonings, her urgent protests, Father Caron answered as he had twenty thousand times in his life answered twenty thousand others who also said that they had dined and supped with the prefect in the most illustrious houses in Paris, France; he answered — that he was in despair, but that he refused decidedly and absolutely to disturb

the prefect's sleep. — 'Please,' said the unhappy woman at the height of her excitement, 'you fear to lose your right to promotion if you enter his room. What compensation do you ask for that misfortune, which may not overtake you after all, what legitimate reward do you want? Three thousand francs? Six thousand francs? Do you want ten thousand? Here are ten thousand, twenty thousand . . . I don't know . . . more or less . . . take it! take it!' And the lady undid suddenly or rather broke quickly the big pearl necklace she had around her neck, took off with the same violent gesture her two diamond bracelets, and thrusting them all into the hand of the usher, stupefied with astonishment, she said to him: 'Now, go!'

"Father Caron opened his eyes wide.

"After having laid in a heap the necklace and the bracelets upon an armchair, the poor usher, intoxicated by all he had heard, walked towards the Prefect's room. At last, he was beaten!

"How could he, after all, resist such a temptation: twenty thousand francs worth of pearls and diamonds!

"The prefect at that time, you can guess his name as easily as if I told it to you, was not an inveterate sleeper, but he had irritable nerves, as have all officials who have to listen fifteen hours a day to the complaints, the petitions, and the ravings of the public. This irritating business makes one become im-

patient, then grumpy, then unapproachable; and if the moment did not come when one has a successor, or can retire, one would end by having raving fits when faced by one of the members of that vast family of bores, who take too literally that definition of Mirabeau: 'From the King of France to the rural guard, every official is at the disposal of the people; every hour of the day and night he must be ready to serve his master.'

"Whatever the cause, Father Caron had his moment of courage. He went straight to the Prefect's bed, as he was sleeping that first sleep, so sweet, so good for those who do not always have a second.

"Caron, who did not want to awaken him too abruptly, was obliged to use several times the few means that exist for awakening a man without disturbing him too much, without annoying him a lot; he pulled chairs about; he coughed; he pulled again, he coughed louder. The Prefect did not open his eyes. At last, he dared to call by name the first magistrate of Paris, an extreme means, dangerous, but sure of attaining the goal so feared, and so much wished for.

"As you can imagine, the waking of the Prefect was not quite that of innocence, by Prud'hon. He raised himself upon his pillows which had been daringly disturbed, and he looked the audacious one straight in the face. Caron, although an old soldier, although he had served in all the campaigns of the

North, melted like a snowball under a pot of hot water. He drew back and shriveled up. When he raised his head a little, he heard these words coming out of the mouth above him: 'Bandit! knave! rogue! When I told you expressly not to enter my room before eight in the morning.' — 'But it is a lady,' muttered the unfortunate usher, who thought, in spite of his terror, of the pearls and the diamonds whose fascination pierced even the walls, 'it is a lady . . .' — 'A lady! . . . well, what if it is a lady . . . !' 'She has the most vital reasons for wishing to speak to M. le Préfet.' 'A woman, at this hour! . . . In such weather! What is this dreadful mystery. And you lent yourself to it, sir! Let her go to the devil!' — 'But this lady says so openly that you know her very well, Monsieur le Préfet, I did not know how to refuse.' — 'By Jove! and who does not know me! Who does not make a pretense of knowing me! That's enough! That's too much! I want to sleep. If you ever dare again to forget my orders when they are as precisely given, I'll dismiss you immediately from the service, do you hear? I'll send you away, I'll remove you. Now you are warned, get out!'

"That said, the prefect plunged under his blankets and tried to regain his broken sleep and to warm his cold shoulders. As for the usher, he went out with bent head, crushed, to tell the mysterious lady of the welcome he had got on her account. But

she, far from being discouraged by this failure, which left her nothing else to do, but to wrap herself up in her evening cloak, climb into her carriage and drive back to her Faubourg Saint-Germain or Saint-Honoré, she said to the usher: '*You must not let him go back to sleep.* Go quickly back to him, and tell him . . .' — 'No, Madame, no, I won't go back to him,' Caron hastened to say, and added, wanting to leave her without a particle of hope: 'Do you know that he threatened me with instant dismissal if I went to him again?' — 'Is that all?' — 'What, is that all! But my position is my life, that of my wife and my children.' — 'Don't let us lose any time,' — went on the lady, taking both the usher's hands in hers: 'How much is your position worth: Two thousand francs? . . . Three thousand? Four thousand? Well, upon my honour, I swear that I'll make you a pension of four thousand francs, which after your death will go on to your family if you are dismissed for having returned to that room and for having said to the Prefect that a woman wants at any price to confide in him a secret upon which her honour and her life depends.' 'A pension of four thousand francs!' Father Caron was thunderstruck; he remained motionless, crushed, stupified, before this pyramidal proposition. A pension of four thousand francs! four thousand francs! To him who was earning eighteen hundred . . . if he

earned them. However, seeing a new hesitation in him: 'Here are two thousand francs,' said the beautiful and obstinate lady, opening a small pocket-book, from which she took two banknotes which she shoved into the usher's pocket: 'those are the first instalments of the pension I shall make you'; and she added: 'You go and tell M. the Prefect that, tomorrow, at the Tuileries, the King of France, Louis-Philippe, will thank him for what he will have done tonight.' To these grand words, pronounced with the simplicity of conviction: The King of France . . . Louis-Philippe . . . Les Tuileries . . . Caron said to himself: 'To whom am I speaking? Who is this lady who has so many diamonds, so much credit, so much money?'

"He could not refuse any more.

"Besides, what did the good usher risk now? His future and that of his family were assured from the tempest which he was to affront. So with a firm step, firm enough, to be exact, he went again into the room of M. the Prefect. M. the Prefect at last was going back to sleep after the disagreeable and brutal interruption. At the same time — unbelievable as it may seem! a new upheaval, a new interruption.

"This time the quick-tempered magistrate lifted, like angered waves, the sheets and blanket, and with one movement threw them far away with his

knees, and then with his legs outside of the bed, his feet anchored firmly on the carpet as if about to spring, like an enraged tiger, upon the thunderstruck usher, he said in a deafening voice: 'What is the matter now? What brings you here? Who brings you here? Take care! Unless police headquarters are on fire . . .' Father Caron answered, while backing to the door: 'The headquarters are not on fire, but that lady is still there; she swears that she won't leave the place without having seen you; she is mad, she cries . . . she says that the king is her friend, that she has dined with him and you at the Tuileries . . .' — 'It is abominable! It's enough to drive me mad to have to see adventuresses. Go on! the King, the Tuileries. . . !' Our supreme chief suddenly sat up, and, crossing his arms resignedly with the false resignation of people not at all resigned, the resignation of people the smoke of whose anger is choking them, went up to the usher and shouted in his face: 'What is the woman's name?' 'She did not give me her name.' — 'Idiot! Go and ask her.' — 'I am hastening.' — Caron did not look back to listen to what his fearful superior was shouting at him: 'If in three minutes this hasn't stopped, I shall see that you spend the rest of the night in jail.'

"More complications! The lady refused to give her name to the usher. She declared emphatically that she would make herself known only to the Pre-

fect himself. This answer, which seemed to Caron his death sentence, gave him food for reflection and he brought it back trembling in every limb. The prefect thought, with his usual sagacity, that a woman audacious enough to go to the prefect, to insist with unequalled obstinacy on her right to be received, and who refused to give her name, after having put forward that of the king, at the risk of compromising herself and of losing the object of her obstinacy if she invented false credentials, he thought, I say, my dear Monsieur de Balzac, that that woman ought to be heard. He said to Caron: — 'Since the lady won't tell her name, well! let her write it and send to me in an envelope.'

"A very deep sigh greeted the answer. She took an envelope from the table, where there were always some for the needs of the service, and put in it one of her visiting cards, which she took out from the small morocco pocket-book in which were the bank notes she had given to the usher, sealed the envelope, and gave it to Caron.

"The Prefect opened the envelope, read the card, and jumped up; read it again and walked in his bare feet to the lamp to assure himself that he was not mistaken in the name he had just read; and after looking at it in astonishment three or four more times, said to Caron: 'Take that lady to my study; I'll dress and be with her in a minute. Go! and show her the greatest courtesy!'"

Here Vidocq stopped, not to breathe, but to drink the rum in his liqueur glass which he thought he had forgotten. Finding it empty, he held it out to Balzac, the flagon being near him.

"Nothing at all!" said Balzac, putting his hand over the crystal stopper; you won't get a drop until you have told me who the lady was."

"I am going to. I don't make stories like you, when you hide the secret as long as you like to stretch the leather strap."

"Hush!" said Balzac, "don't throw stones into my garden! The name of the lady? The name?"

"It was the beautiful Countess Hélène de B . . ."

"A star of the bourgeois court? Impossible?" cried Balzac, taken aback.

"It was she, I swear!"

"One of the ten or twelve Egerias?"

"I told you her name. Now some rum! some rum, Monsignor!"

"Here, my master," replied Balzac, pouring rum generously into Vidocq's glass.

And he also said, after stretching himself comfortably in his armchair as if he had laid the granite bases of a monumental attention:

"Quick, what is the rest of the story? What was the beautiful, the magnificent Comtesse de B . . . doing at police headquarters, at one A.M., with the thermometer fifteen degrees below zero?"

Vidocq went on: "The prefect of police and the

lady, who had struggled for two hours to be admitted, were at last face to face.

"There was no error, no lie, no trumpery; the visitor was really the one whose name was engraved upon the visiting card. It was the beautiful and witty Comtesse Hélène de B . . . ; one of the most remarkable women, with her beauty and distinction of mind, of the reign of Louis-Philippe, that reign in which women, as we'll see later, played a great part; yes, she was one of those who are supposed, rightly or wrongly, I don't know, to have wielded considerable influence upon the crown and who if they did not bring peace or war, brought often birth or death to cabinets, in the folds of their petticoats.

"I don't need to tell you how astonished the prefect was to see this celebrated woman in his study, and how confused over the many difficulties he had made to receive her. He tried to excuse himself, to explain his position; but the countess did not give him time to say anything, to finish anything. Politeness and all the trimmings of conversation were not wanted! Her trembling and unequal voice, her eyes opened wide by a terror which, instead of diminishing, seemed to have paralyzed all her faculties since her arrival in the building, the deadly pallor spread upon her face, if one can call pallor a tint greenish upon her cheeks, violet around the lips, were asking something quite different from at-

tentions and courtesies! 'Here is what brings me to you,' she said, sitting down near a chimney where the fire was dying. . . . 'A great misfortune has happened to me . . .' She stopped, her voice did not reach her lips. 'A misfortune such as has never happened to any woman . . .' A second time she was obliged to wait to be able to speak. 'It is impossible for you to conceive what it is . . .' She stopped again, unable to breathe. But soon, after a violent effort to control herself: 'You'll save me! You'll save me,' she cried, 'you'll save me!' — Then she said: 'As I was telling you . . .' She did not know what she was saying, and repeating the movements of her maid before me and my subordinates in the room underneath, she went to the window to look at the carriage which had brought her to the Prefecture. She did not see it. She uttered a cry of despair, opened the window, looked to the right, to the left, uttered a second cry, and then, her hands over her face, walked backwards and fell into the seat she had left. She did not know, the poor woman who had lost her head, she did not know that the rooms where she was at that moment did not look out upon the same street over which she had come. The Prefect understood at once the cause of her error and hastened to quiet her.

"The explanation calmed her. The choking which had seized her disappeared slowly, and, when she was able to breathe enough to speak, she said to the

Prefect, very attentive, because there were so many sighs, so many hiccoughs, so much palpitation in her voice, that it was not easy to understand her: 'My husband, whom you know . . .' 'Yes, Madame.' 'My husband left, a week ago, for Bordeaux, where he was called for family affairs, a big inheritance.' The Prefect answered that he knew about that heritage, about which he thought also that a lawsuit was impending on the part of numerous disinherited heirs. The countess nodded her assent, and, going on, she said, in a frightened and hollow voice that, during his absence, she had received several times a person . . . 'a young man,' she stressed with effort, whom she had met in the Austrian embassy. She blamed herself for her imprudence, because the count her husband, of a very jealous temperament, almost frenzied, already old enough not to pardon any assault upon his conjugal honour, had remarked the attentions of the young Hungarian officer. 'He was a Hungarian officer,' she said in parenthesis, and, speaking, note this peculiarity, all the time in the past tense, a thing which troubled and disturbed the prefect's attention centered upon the story of an event which, evidently, had just taken place. Without encouraging the attentions of the young officer, the latter had thought he would profit by the absence of the Count, and present himself at her house several times a day, 'and often,' she added in the same penitent tone,

'and often, in the evening, late, very late.' He had at last wanted — always against her wishes and her will — to accompany her in her carriage when she came out from the Théâtre des Italiens, and to go in, and he had asked the favour of remaining a few minutes for a chat. Of course it was very reprehensible, since the world might not approve, and an awful event, terrible, had been the consequence of that fatal weakness. . . . At the word *event,* which reminded the countess what brought her to the police headquarters, she lost all the precautions of speech which she had used until then, in spite of herself, and which women, even the most immoral ones, use when they are obliged to acknowledge the loss of their reputation, especially to a man superior in his position and his intelligence, and she cried, in a muffled explosion like the noise of an overcharged mine which bursts inside: 'This young man was my lover, yes, my lover. I was his mistress, his mistress for the last six months, since he came to Paris with the new embassy to perfect his military studies.'

"This clear and frank revelation, as you can understand, put the magistrate at his ease, for he had been waiting, since the beginning of that strange confession, for some light, so that he would know on which side to interest himself in a catastrophe whose end he thought he saw, a banal, ordinary ending — return of the husband, escape of the lover,

by the roof or the cellar, flight of the woman, coming to ask him to protect her against threats of an assault or a murder, if she went back to the conjugal roof. Well! it was nothing like that: the prefect was wrong in all his conjectures; they were not true, as you'll see. After the brutal admission which she had made, the countess could only tell the rest openly.

"Here is what she said: she said that the love she had for M. de Karls . . . (that's the young officer's name) was as great, on her side, as his, but she had asked and begged him, four days after the count's departure, to stop his visits completely, for she was unwilling to risk, for the last four days of the husband's absence, the chance of the latter's arriving and surprising them. M. de Karls . . . had promised as all lovers do, and like all lovers, he had not kept his promise.

"The next day, it was true, he had not come; but the day after that, he had come to her house; and the day after, he sent his name up to the Countess although she had forbidden her door to everyone.

"At last, after a letter from the Count in which he announced his return from Bordeaux, for the following night, at three in the morning, M. de Karls . . . had come in the evening, that is to say, on the same night when the Count was to arrive, the night that was still going on, and which she was destined, she, Countess Hélène de B. . . , to

spend at the police headquarters, almost, except for the floor, as a prostitute, picked up while wandering in the streets of Paris. That imprudence had compromised everything, had lost everything. 'Your husband back from Bordeaux?' the Prefect of Police asked then; 'then your husband caught you together tonight and you have come to tell me of a very much more serious misfortune than the one I saw in your last words? He surprised you and your lover and he fought or has arranged to fight this morning, and you have come to ask me to prevent it. . . .' — 'My husband has not caught us, he has not yet arrived, because it is not three o'clock, and he is only due at three, and it is not quite two. . . .' — 'He could have through some stratagem advanced the hour of his arrival. . . .' 'He did not advance the time.' — 'What, then,' asked the Prefect, 'is the great, extraordinary, the irreparable misfortune you want to confide to me? Permit me to say that you are probably exaggerating; but I understand it. At bottom, no one has as yet suffered any damage, no one is wounded, no one is dead. . . .' The Prefect was almost ironical, almost gay in making this objection in the face of the broken confidences of the Countess, just as one throws the cards to one's opponent, when one's cards are so good as to render useless the playing of the hand. 'There are no wounded, no dead, you are saying, M. le Préfet . . . ; there are no wounded, it is possi-

ble, as for the dead, there are two of them . . . I first of all . . . I won't survive the cruel blow which went through my heart; besides the one who is in my carriage.' — 'In your carriage?' 'In my carriage. My lover, M. de Karl died tonight in my home, two hours ago, and his body is in my carriage.' — 'Died in your home? died murdered? A corpse.' — 'No, not murdered, but from heart-failure, beside me. . . . Oh, it is horrible, because, at this moment, I am obliged to think of my reputation, of my honour, that unbearable honour, of the world which will know everything; forced to think of my husband's honour when I would like to give way to my sorrow, my tears, for this beloved of mine, for him alone, to keep him, to take him far away, to bury him, to live his death as I have lived his life during the six months I loved him. But that's not the question,' said the Countess in another tone, swallowing her tears; 'that's not the question; no! I have, I have already told you, a dead man in my carriage; what am I to do with him? You are the only person who can get me out of this.' — 'How, Madame, how? You think too highly of my resources, which are not boundless . . . , and then, for such an extraordinary case . . . what means? Nothing like it has ever come my way, nothing in the least like it.' The Countess had risen. 'And yet you must save me,' she said, adding the authority of the powerful

woman to the authority of the woman who begged; 'it is indispensable. I won't leave here till you have found something. . . . You have a thousand ways, you of the police to . . .' — 'A common error, Madame, but a great and real error. I told you there are no means in such a grave case so particularly extraordinary.'

"However, the Prefect, who did not want to make the unhappy Countess Helene more desperate than she was . . . , who wished, on the contrary, with all his soul, to deliver her from the torment she was bearing with superhuman courage, to take her out from that furnace in which she was turning round without finding an exit, and in which he foresaw she would inevitably perish, die in a few hours, if time, which went on not without danger, did not bring an extreme and radical solution, walked up and down in his study, looked at the ceiling, the windows, the door; he stopped; began his pacing again, clutched his head, automatic gestures repeated in a tragic and burlesque manner at the same time by the countess, who followed, step by step, all the gestures and the least movements of the prefect.

"But with all that he found nothing, with all that he thought of nothing; he had been right only when he told himself that the countess's life was passing with the avidity and rapidity of vitriol in flames, and that time was fanning this combustion in a

dangerous manner from second to second; so true, that the countess, showing her watch to the prefect, had only to say: 'Three o'clock; my husband is entering Paris now,' for the prefect, determined at any price to do something, but not yet knowing what, walked mechanically to one of the bell cords, and pulled it strongly. The bell he had just rung was in my office. Was he asking for me? I can't be sure. I believe in inspiration good as well as bad; don't you, Monsieur de Balzac?"

"Of course, but don't let's stop on the way: gallop, gallop!"

"After ringing, the chief of police turned to Madame the Countess Hélène de B. . . . 'There is only one man in Paris, and I might say in the world, clever enough to help you out of the fix in which your bad star placed you: do you want this man to make a third? I have called him, but there is still time to leave him in the dark if you are unwilling to confide in another. . . . And yet, I repeat, he alone . . .' 'Do you answer for his discretion?' — 'As for yours, Madame.' 'Ask him to come.' — 'He is coming.'

"Now, let me tell you, Monsieur de Balzac, that I might very well not have been at police headquarters." Vidocq went on. "I was not always there. But a most important and most delicate expedition was to take place at daybreak, and to bring it to a happy conclusion I had been honoured by them, and

the day before they had asked the aid of my collaboration and of my experience."

The word collaboration, pronounced in such a circumstance, shocked Balzac, and Vidocq, seeing the astonishment he had created, thought an explanation was necessary. "It is the word," he went on, in an apologetic murmur, used at headquarters to describe the association of local talents in some big police affair. One brings to those striking cases his clear vision, another his infallible prudence, another his self-possession, and still another his audacity. Don't all those qualities, combined for the quicker attainment of a particular aim represent a real collaboration?"—"At bottom, it is true," said Balzac, who had very quickly seen the vanity behind the word, and who, besides, was too much enamoured of police secrets not to pardon to the police, in the person of one of their illustrious members, its whims, its pride, and its weaknesses. "All right, collaboration goes!" he cried good-humouredly: "now, tell me, dear collaborator, the part you played in that Spanish comedy."

"First, the part of an admirer," answered Vidocq, always ready to put forward his pretensions as a Don Juan, pretensions still very alive at that time, in spite of his advanced age, very advanced, because Vidocq, when he died a few years later, was very old.

"The part of an admirer," he repeated. "The

extraordinary beauty of the countess struck me like a sun suddenly rising at midnight; I won't say it dazzled me; it blinded me, despite the excessive disorder of her attire. I have never seen a more magnificent beauty of twenty-five. What shoulders! What a figure! What noble, proud, graceful movements! Marble and velvet. A beautiful creature! One can't imagine a queen more beautiful, since it is thought that queens ought to be more favoured in that way than other women. She made, as you can see, a great impression upon me, and I beg you to believe, Monsieur de Balzac, that, in my life, already long enough as it is, I have had many opportunities for comparison and for reasoned choice," added Vidocq, with the conceit which he bared for the third or fourth time.

"Well," he went on, "except for an Italian, who owes me a candle, be it said in passing, for having saved her in the celebrated affair of the diamond theft at the home of the Marquise de Fuentes, where three valets were murdered . . . you remember that famous theft — except for that Italian, I do not remember ever seeing such perfection in a woman. I do not doubt that, in a less excited moment than the one when I appeared before her, she would have noticed my amazement — amazement is not the word — my rapture. But that night we all had our eyes and thoughts occupied by other things than beauty and admiration.

"Vidocq," said the prefect, straight to me, as I entered his office, and I am going to repeat our dialogue almost word for word: "Vidocq, an important personage is dead, suddenly, tonight, a few hours ago, in Madame's house."

"Yes Monsieur the Prefect; he died suddenly."

"This lady's husband is away, but he is coming back tonight."

"At what time?"

"Just now."

"You might as well say that he is back."

"Yes, you might; the body of the young man is downstairs, in a carriage," added the prefect, "in Madame's carriage."

"The countess looked at me. I was as calm as I am now. I was listening. I was thinking.

"Vidocq?"

"Yes, sir," I answered, "I am waiting."

"You must get rid of that man for us."

"The husband or the lover?"

"The dead man," said the prefect drily.

"I had understood perfectly, but I had been unable to refrain from making a little joke.

"It is much more difficult then," I answered my magistrate. "A live man, that's easy . . . but a dead one! . . . Let us see. You wish me, before daybreak, to get rid of the dead man who is in the carriage of Madame the Countess de B. . . ." "You know me!" interrupted the countess. "I have the

honour, Madame." "The prefect looked at Madame de B . . . with an expression which meant: You can see there is no danger in taking Vidocq into our confidence.

"There are means of getting rid of the dead," I said.

"All the countess's energy showed in her eyes.

"What are they?" she asked me.

"Do you wish, Madame, that, at three or four this morning, when it is daylight, the corpse should be found, pierced by a dagger, upon the highroad?"

"Murdered!"

"Yes, Madame, murdered! three thrusts in the stomach, one in the heart. It will be well done. He will be picked up. No purse, no watch, no rings will be found upon him. He was robbed. The thieves have killed him. Great excitement for twenty-four hours. Legal inquiries; inquiries which can only come to nothing, since there has been neither theft nor murder. A week later, the event is forgotten."

"Murdered!"

"But, since he is dead, where is the harm, the crime in knifing him?"

"Stop!" cried the countess, who had hidden her face in her nervous hands. "Enough, sir! Enough! Enough!"

"I looked at the prefect to discover his opinion; I was not encouraged in insisting on mine. And yet, murdering a corpse! . . ." "Murdered!" the

countess was still muttering, "horrible! horrible! No, I don't want it . . . no knifing! no!"

"I was silent; the others were silent for a few minutes, after rejecting the means that I proposed; a good plan, however, for that delicate situation. But there are people who are sensitive, you know?

"Since that does not appeal to you," I said to the countess, "do you want, Madame, the body of the person in your carriage to disappear from the world, absolutely as if it never existed?"

"How?" asked the countess, uncovering her astonished face.

"I am asking if you want the young man, who has died so suddenly, to disappear no less suddenly from the world. People may seek him, but he will never be found."

"Never?"

"Never."

"What, no burial?"

"No burial . . . no burial . . . if you must also have the luxury of burial . . . ! My plan is impossible."

"But still, how will you make him disappear?"

"That's my business."

"Oh! no, I must know. . . ."

"Believe me, Madame, don't try to know. . . ."

"On the contrary, if you don't tell me . . ."

"Does the surgeon show the patient the saw with which he is going to cut off his leg? Heavens!

Madame, once again, what does it matter to you how the young man will disappear, as long as we free you of him? Leave me free, entirely free to use the means I believe the surest, the best to reach our aim, which is not easy, I assure you; well do you want the second way, yes or no, Madame? "

"No!"

"At that dry and precise answer, I took my hat which I had thrown into a corner, upon entering, and walked towards the door. Seeing that, the countess uttered a cry of pain which made me turn suddenly. In so doing I saw the sign of authority which the prefect made to me, to order me to stay. I stopped and came back.

"Something else, Monsieur," said the countess to me, "imagine, think of something else, I beg you. My life and honour are in your hands."

"In spite of the scruples of the countess, which I would have ignored deliberately, had it not been for my respect for my chief, that is to say, I would have taken, in spite of the lady's objections, the body left in the carriage, and would have thrown it, with a hundred pounds of stone, from the bridge of Iena in the Seine; in spite of the countess's resistance without any plausible reason, I say, I saw clearly that I was master of the situation, and I spoke thus to this noble lady: "Madame, if you want me, as you seem to, to do something for you, tell me scrupulosuly what happened tonight; it is only

at that price that I can help you and save you. For a case of death, you call a celebrated surgeon; you can't hide anything from him. I hope you will forgive my modesty, but I am that celebrated surgeon; you are the patient: do you want me to save you? Speak, tell me everything."

"What strength of will the countess mustered, to begin her fearful confession!"

"Well," she said, "since it is necessary . . . ! M. Karls . . . extracted from my weakness the permission of spending a little while with me, after we had been to the Théâtre des Italiens. He gave himself permission to have tea with me."

"It is really unbelievable, my dear Monsieur de Balzac, how often tea has been the cause of many of those nightly rendezvous, more or less fatal to married life.

"Was it the first time," I asked the Countess Hélène de B . . . "that M. Karls . . . went to take tea at your house in your husband's absence."

"The first time, Monsieur."

"Very well."

"Why that question?"

"Because your servants won't be more than ordinarily astonished when they hear of the death of M. Karls. . . . They won't say to each other: Oh! it is strange! That young man who had spent several nights here, is the one who has just died. . . . — As if one did not have to spend the night

somewhere before dying. Those people are very stupid, but very dangerous. It was then the first night he spent in your home? "

"The first evening, Monsieur."

"Evening, all right. A long evening."

"— We had been very cold," went on the countess, without paying any attention to the impertinence of my remark, "exceedingly cold coming from the Italiens to my house in the Rue Bellechasse, and so, when we arrived, I asked to have a big fire made. While my household was busy fulfilling my orders, and M. Karls, seated upon a divan, was looking at the evening papers, I went to my room to take off my wraps and to change my shoes; I went back to the drawing-room and rang for tea. Five minutes later it was brought, and we talked, seated by the chimney, where the servants, having exaggerated my orders, had made a fire big enough to set the house ablaze. We had been there an hour, talking of one thing or another, of the performance at the Italiens, of the play, the actors, when M. de Karls . . ."

"— A thousand pardons, Madame, but what time could it have been then, when you entered your house in the Rue Bellechasse?" "You'll see Monsieur de Balzac, how that simple question almost upset, right at the beginning, the countess's story and rendered the rest almost unintelligible."

"Merciful Heavens!" cried Balzac, "how miraculous, how marvellous! Emotion is very easily responsible for errors of time committed in such cases, if it is of such an error that you are going to speak."

"It is precisely of such an error I am going to speak, you felt it; but my dear interrupter, remember this, emotion had nothing to do with it, although the Countess Hélène de B . . .'s emotion was alarmingly violent."

"We shall see, we shall see!"

"You'll see at once. After a rather pronounced hesitation, the countess answered very quickly:

"— Since I told you, Monsieur, that we had just come out from the Italiens, it was, probably, a quarter past or half-past eleven."

"Are you sure, Madame, of the time?"

"I am sure," replied the countess in a tone which showed much more annoyance than assurance.

"Then, allow me to point out to you, Madame, that it was only about half past twelve when you arrived here with your maid at police headquarters. Then, from half past eleven till half past twelve, that is to say, in one hour, one hour only, you changed, you took tea, and you spoke for about *an hour* with M. Karls . . . , you had your carriage brought out again, since, in the interval, the coachman had had time to unharness the horses, and you came, still in the same space of time, one

hour, from the Rue Bellechasse to the Rue de Jérusalem? "

"— I admit," muttered Balzac, "that there is . . . "

"Let the countess answer," went on Vidocq cutting his words short, "and you'll see how right I was to be astonished at the disparity between the time and the events told by her, events, please note, that I was far from knowing, because if I had known them all, as it happened a little later, my objection would have been a hundred times more crushing, and nothing that the countess could have said afterwards would have appeared true or even likely. And then where would we have been? First of all, I would not have consented to act in the dark nor to help in the disappearance of a man whose death seemed queer to me. No! "

"— How did the countess get out of that? " asked Balzac, who, at that moment, looked more like a detective than Vidocq, there was so much uneasiness, so much cunning shining in his eyes, trying to guess the intentions of the countess, who was stirring the water, so as to hide some important, essential, unmentionable thing.

"— How did she get out of that? " Vidocq went on. "Well, thank Heaven, by telling the whole truth, or at least almost the whole truth. She said that she did not recall very well if she and M. de Karls . . . had left the Italiens at the end of the performance,

or a little before the end. Asked to be more precise, she admitted that they had left long before the end.

"— Since it was long before the end," I went on, "it may have been ten or even nine o'clock when you went to your house, instead of half past eleven."

"— The Devil!" said Balzac, "didn't go to the Italiens at all."

"I don't suppose so."

"— One can admit that, and as for me . . ."

"— Now you admit too much, just as a while ago, you admitted nothing, because of emotion. You'll see, in the continuation of my story and without my needing to tell you everything, absolutely everything, that it was necessary to go back to nine o'clock to encompass, without passing midnight, all the grave events of the evening.

The countess told her story more easily when I forced her to put back her point of departure, in the interest of probability; but I felt, back of her words, a bitterness which was not there before. I understood her. She would have liked to suppress the lover, and show me only the stranger in her terrible confession. It was impossible."

"But she had already told the prefect that this M. de Karls was her lover."

"— Yes, Monsieur de Balzac, the prefect, but not me. It was terribly painful to her to repeat her confession, and, still more to tell how she had spent the time during the evening.

"— Here, Vidocq, once more, let us cut out the Italiens from that evening, and suppress the evening also you'll see."

"— And yet . . ."

"Nothing is clearer."

"— How is that?"

"There had been a night, not an evening."

"Oh! I don't go so far as that! I do not go that far; my dear Monsieur de Balzac! There was some, a little of the Italiens."

"— Very little! Very little!"

"All right. A little evening after the Italiens."

"— Still *less* than that!"

"Ah! Did they have tea?"

"— You are a terrible man, Monsieur de Balzac!"

"— No more terrible than the truth, Monsieur Vidocq."

"— The countess went on, but fatigue overcame her."

"— The drawing-room," she said, "had been so much overheated by the servants, that I was obliged to call my personal maid, Honorine, and have her open the door into my bedroom, so that the spreading heat would diminish a little. The windows were not opened for you know how cold the night was. . . . The atmosphere of the room, the tea, the conversation, had given an extraordinary animation to M. de Karls. . . . He was over-excited, he seemed

to feel a kind of drunkenness, a fever, exaltation; he spoke a lot, quickly, very quickly; he was laughing; at last, his agitation reached such a point, that he asked me, because he was stifling, either to take off his coat or to leave. He needed air. I granted him permission to take off his coat. After he had sat down on the sofa again, he began telling me, with still more gaiety than before, a theatrical adventure, I don't remember exactly, some farcical accident which had happened to an actress when she was on the stage; he never stopped laughing while telling it. Suddenly I heard nothing more. Some seconds passed, and I begged him to go on with the story; no answer; I begged, I insisted, then the same silence. I thought then that M. de Karls . . . had been seized by an irresistible desire to sleep, as sometimes happens. It was late, he was tired, yes, he is asleep, I thought. However, astonished by the sudden transition from a noisy, exaggerated joy, to such a sound sleep, I left my armchair to make sure . . . M. de Karl's face . . . was frightfully discomposed, his eyes were distorted, only the whites could be seen; a corner of his mouth touched his ear. He was dead. I uttered a cry, a cry I did not hear, for while uttering it, I fainted at the foot of the sofa. You see, my forehead is bruised there. Honorine came quickly. Despite death and my fainting, she did not lose her head for a moment; with one look she measured the danger, and what danger was ever

so great, so real! My husband was soon to arrive, he was on his way; he was hurrying from Etampes to Paris, in three hours he would be with me. Honorine ran to my boudoir, and without hesitation, put a sponge in ice water left in a basin near the window, and placed this sponge upon my cheeks, my eyes, my bosom. While I was coming back to my senses, she pushed the sofa towards a window; and hid the corpse under the curtains. I came back to life; Honorine told me then that we had to make some decision immediately. What kind of decision could I have made? So it was she, Honorine, a very strong woman, you know! Such character. . . . She did everything. She had often heard me talk about the head of the police; she wanted to come to him, tell him everything, put ourselves absolutely in his hands, and without further hesitation. We had to do it while everybody was asleep in the house; so, the two of us took the dead man down into the yard, opened the carriage house noiselessly, put him into the carriage; once he was in the carriage we awakened the coachman and told him that we were going to the Quai des Orfèvres, at the corner of the Rue Sainte-Chapelle. He was a good German who had only arrived in Paris the month before; he would not try to know any more. But, of course, we could not think of taking the footman with us; he had sprained his ankle, he could not walk. Besides, what a complication he would have

added! The coachman took the carriage out and harnessed the horses; meanwhile, I was putting on evening clothes, to convince my husband, if necessary, if I found him at home on my return, that I had gone to a soirée. From where could I be coming back at that time? . . . Honorine invented, decided, planned all that. I was stunned, idiotic, I did what she wanted, only looking at her. Yes, but poor Honorine had not thought of the greatest of difficulties. What an awful task! What more awful task than to dress a corpse. Everything fell, slipped, floated. The outstretched arms refused to enter the sleeves, and when we forced them in, horrible creakings were heard. And to put the feet back into the shoes and spats . . . ! No, nothing in the world can be compared with that painful and sacrilegious dressing."

"Then he had taken off his shoes also?" asked Balzac.

"Ah! there you are!"

"She had only spoken of his coat, it seems to me."

"Unravel the mystery. You can see that to question, in such a case, was impossible. Besides, Madame de B . . . , noticing her error, caused by excitement, and shock, tried to destroy it, by another incident."

"Afterwards," she went on, "we had to carry M. de Karls . . . down to the carriage, and to carry

him without any noise, so as not to awaken the porter, and to open the carriage house! When he was put into the carriage, I went up quickly again to dress as for a party. Honorine had gone to wake the coachman, and she had to remain with him all the time he was harnessing, so that he would not open the carriage! How little inclined I was for dressing! Do you know what I did! I took ribbons, jewels, bracelets, rouge, brooches, everything within reach of my hands. It was only after I arrived here that I noticed that I had a black shoe and a white satin slipper. The rest is as I have told you. The coachman took his carriage out; he harnessed the horses; I was watching, I came down, then Honorine and I climbed in, and at last we left, *the three of us,* to come here."

"All this was told by Madame de B . . . with decision, a sobriety of words, a strength of heart which gave me, Vidocq, hardened enough in all such matters, a cold shiver down my spine. My back felt cold. To recover, I laid unnoticed my hands flat upon the still warm marble of the mantelpiece. But as it was my turn to speak, or rather, to act, I recovered very quickly. I forced my blood to be quiet, my nerves to be steady."

"Madame," I said to the countess, "another word!"

"Another!" she said. "What else do you want to know?" And she muttered between her clenched

teeth, as if she were trying to bite and tear her fate: "What insults! What shame! What a misfortune!"

"I looked as if I had not heard; I asked her:"

"On what street does M. de Karls . . . live?"

"— What, must I tell you?" . . .

"It is necessary, and the number of his house."

"— Here!" she said, giving me a street and a number.

"All right, that's all. In a few minutes, I hope, Madame, everything will be all right."

"— And how?"

"I shall tell you."

"— And no dagger thrusts, no violent disappearances?"

"— Nothing like that, since you do not want it. All will take place in the simplest possible manner, and it is you, yourself, Madame, who, because of your almost complete sincerity, have inspired me with the plans I am going to use so that your reputation may not be compromised, and so that the body of M. de Karls . . . may be respected as it would be in the bosom of his family. In a quarter of an hour, the remains of M. de Karls . . . will be in his house, in his room. And you, Madame," I added, pulling out my watch, "in five minutes, you'll be in your carriage, which will go to your house, free from the sad burden there now."

"— Ah, sir, what gratitude is mine! But what

gratitude will ever be as great as the service you are rendering me? "

"After throwing her arms around the prefect's neck and kissing him with all the nervous violence of her joy, she squeezed my hand hard enough to break it. It was one of the most beautiful moments of my life."

Vidocq passed his hand over his eyes.

Balzac, who was watching him, poured out, without ceasing to look at him, a big glass of rum.

"No," said Vidocq, "later. I need nothing now."

And he thrust the glass aside with a gesture, whose magnificence, magnitude and nobility, Frédérick Lemaître, as great an actor as he is, would have admired and remembered. The memory of a beautiful action sanctified the old age of a man who had not always been as pure, as well inspired, as during that memorable night.

He went on:

"You can see that there was no time to lose to execute my project, not that the daybreak was near; but I felt, I won't hide it from you, a certain defiance in my mind, a certain fear, which I had not judged necessary to share with the countess, or the prefect, lest I spoil the contentment which I had created in them. I preceded the countess, and I opened the door, showing her in that way that we had nothing more to do in the prefect's office, and that the scene

of action was now going to be transferred to the street.

"Before going out, she turned once more to the prefect and said to him, her hand upon her heart, with conviction:

"You can count upon me as upon God."

"We left, she and I, the private office of the chief of police.

"Going through the hall, she whispered to Caron, who was waiting for her, a candlestick in his hand:

"You won't be forgotten, Monsieur; and everything will be done as I promised."

"I then walked with her down the big staircase of police headquarters. Just as it turns, I stopped to open the door of the waiting-room; — I had left there, if you remember, the beautiful maid of the countess. — She came forward, with the eagerness of the freed prisoner, and joined her mistress, not less happy to find her again, who told her, leaning on her arm: "Honorine, everything is all right, all right! but don't leave me, because all is not over."

"No, everything was not over!

"While the two ladies went down in front of me, I signalled discreetly to one of my most intelligent men seated near the stove."

"Where he was still eating chestnuts?" said Balzac.

"Where he was still eating chestnuts; I made a sign, he emptied his pipe; I told him to follow

me; he took his coat, his hat, his weighted stick, and followed me.

" In a few concise words such as we know how to use when necessary, I told him everything, and afterwards: " Yes, that's the way we'll do it, if the countess's coachman is still asleep."

" I had not forgotten, as you can see, the words muttered by the maid a few hours before when she had looked at her mistress' carriage: *He sleeps!* I then said to my man: " If he is not asleep, it won't be the same thing at all; there will be some difficulty . . . !"

" We'll see," said the man, " we shall see."

" You'll see yourself that it was necessary that he should be asleep. Our first act was to take away the corpse from the carriage. And how to take it away if the coachman were awake and heard us opening the door, if he saw us go inside and remove the corpse . . . ?

" — Besides," I said to my man, " if he is not asleep, he has to be," and my man answered: " Yes, he has to sleep one way or another." — " Heavens, not another, no!" I said. I must tell you, Monsieur de Balzac, that there are several more or less innocuous ways to provoke sleep with those one must tame by other means than by force. But they are not without danger. Violent narcotics, for instance, bring too deep lethargies, and grave disorders follow, which we don't know how to avoid.

And besides one can't use them in all circumstances. If the subject is not quite willing, how is one to procure the artificial sleep he needs? One can easily conceive that during a meal, one can pour, without being seen, a sleeping draught in wine or coffee; nothing is easier, but how is one to put to sleep a coachman sitting on his seat? And that was the case we were facing. No, we had to trust to Providence to see that the coachman of the Countess Hélène de B . . . would not be awake when we were putting our plan into execution. The moment had come.

"The four of us were in the yard of police headquarters, the two women, my man and I. I thought it prudent that the countess and her maid should not go any farther. I begged them not to go through the big gate, the one that opens sideways upon the Rue de Jérusalem. I told them to wait for us in the porter's room, and not to be frightened if we did not come back for them as quickly as they might wish, and as we did. The unknown part of the equation is so fathomless in all human affairs! The unknown for me and my man was the important question whether the coachman was awake or asleep.

"We left the ladies and walked along the walls of the Rue de Jérusalem to reach the Quai des Orfèvres. A few steps away from the small Rue de Nazareth which opens into the Rue de Jérusalem

itself, we were stopped short by the most abominable piece of ill luck, although feared and foreseen."

"What was it?"

"We heard a song being hummed."

"The coachman was not asleep," said Balzac, and we all said it with him.

"It was a very popular song," Vidocq went on, "very fashionable then, absolutely forgotten today, but which I, for my part, I won't forget all my life. Here is the tune and the words:

Tois qui connais les hussards de la garde,
Connais-tu pas le trombone du régiment?
Quel air aimable quand il vous regarde!
Eh bien, ma chère, il était mon amant.

"The voice was coming from the Quai des Orfèvres; it came from the place where the carriage of the countess was stationed. What awful luck! I muttered, and what an awful song! added my man, as a pun; he also liked his joke. But what were we to do? If I had listened to him, he would have stopped the man by climbing up behind him like an Indian savage; afterwards he would take him off his seat, acting as if he wanted to rob him in a corner, and, meanwhile, I would have to manage with the corpse and the ladies. Then my man would let his prey go, and the coachman would go back to his carriage, not knowing what had happened. I

would not hear of this plan. 'What are you going to do?' asked my man. — 'How do I know, now that we are so completely done! Let us go to the quay.'

"Here we are on the Quai des Orfèvres; we arrived at the garden gate that we know, we went behind the carriage and walked on tip-toe along the parapet of the quay. After passing the horses, we looked at the seat to assure ourselves sorrowfully that the coachman was not asleep. He was!"

"And the song you had heard?"

"It was another who was singing it, a late workman who had bent over the parapet for a few minutes to look at the water; then he had gone on as we saw; he was going away across the Pont Saint-Michel, from whose height the night echo brought back the chorus, which grew fainter as it disappeared into the Rue de la Harpe:

Toi qui connais les hussards de la garde,
Connais-tu pas le trombone du régiment?
Quel air aimable quand il vous regarde!
Eh bien, ma chère, il était mon amant.

"— Now!" I said to my man. "Run to the ladies and tell them they can come." — I had already opened the door, the man had hardly gone — taken the dead man in my arms, and had propped him up against the parapet of the Quai des Orfèvres. He

was a magnificent man, five feet eight or nine, at least, blond, elegant, and what clothes, what linen! I put him down upon the ground, and pushed him against the railing into the shadow-line. I propped the corpse up with two stones; at the head and at the feet; the ground sloped, so that it was inclined to fall. All was done in a jiffy, and I went back to the carriage. I saw the two poor women coming; they had hardly the strength to walk, for they were like two shadows. We were obliged, my man and myself, to hold them up and to help them to get in the carriage. And what terror, what wordless anguish as they entered it! But their gruesome companion was gone. — "You swear to me, Monsieur," said the countess, seizing my arm, and digging her nails into it, as I was about to close the door, you swear to me that no outrage will be committed . . ." — "I swore, Madame, that in a quarter of an hour M. de Karls . . . would be in his bed; he will be there." I bowed and banged the carriage door upon the two women; then I threw myself as quickly as a cat upon the wheel, and pinched hard the ears of the coachman: "Scoundrel!" I cried in a booming voice, "double scoundrel! can't you hear the ladies have been asking you to start for the last quarter of an hour?"

"I am ready, I am ready!" answered the coachman, gathering the reins, "I am ready, where to? . . . Where am I to go? . . ."

"To your mistress's house, drunkard, to your master's house, Rue de Bellechasse."

"The vehicle started off at lightning speed. The stones of the roadway flew up from the horses' hooves. A few minutes later, nothing could be seen or heard.

"Without losing any time, I led the inspector to the dark corner where I had left the corpse of M. de Karls . . . , and, he and I, after raising him from the ground, each by one arm, stood him up, at least as far as we were able. He was not really standing, for we held him suspended between us, just as one would to maintain the equilibrium of a man completely intoxicated. Although my subordinate's strength was almost equal to mine, it was only with difficulty that we prevented him from slipping away from us, from escaping our embrace. It was in that uncomfortable position that we began to walk to the Pont-Neuf. I had an idea. The Pont-Neuf is a vast river to which all the currents of the town lead, and on which it is impossible for anyone in the world to say with certainty from what part of Paris comes the person one meets there. Is it from the Cité? From the Faubourg Saint-Germain, from the Place de Grève, from the Faubourg Saint-Jacques? No one can tell.

"It was my intention to befog all the subsequent calculations that might occur to find out where M. de Karls . . . had spent the night. That's why I

chose the Pont-Neuf. Although it is only a very short distance, as you know, from the Rue de Jérusalem to that bridge, I would not make such a journey again for any money.

" Once opposite the Place Dauphine, we stopped, and I decided we would wait there for a cab to pass by. Of course, anyone who knows Paris could guess that we did not have long to wait. As soon as we heard one coming from the Rue Dauphine, I told the inspector to be ready to imitate drunken men with me, and to sing a drinking song, as much as possible in German. I had hardly finished giving this order to my man, when he brought out from the most Tyrolean part of his throat an Alsatian song, helped bravely by me, who had the advantage of knowing, I must confess, the most beautiful ballads of the Meuse and the Rhine, of Sarrebruck, Sarrelouis, Sarreguemines and all the known Sarres. Thirty paces away from us, the cab driver, whom we were watching, must have thought: " Heavens! here are three drunks who have just come out from some big orgy." And we lurched from right to left with our dead man, and we bowed back and forth; we were magnificent. When we were only a few steps away from the cab: 'Coachman,' I said, 'would it be agreeable to you to take Monsieur home? We have neither enough time nor enough balance, my comrade and I.' Without waiting for his answer, I had opened the carriage and deposited our burden

in it, not bothering very much how I placed him on the seat. I closed the door quickly, shouting to the driver, after giving him a five franc piece for his ride: 'Rue Saint-Florentin, first big house on the right. Go!'

"And he went! Once more we sang the German song, as a last good-bye from two drunks to their companion, from whom they are parting sorrowfully.

"The trick was played."

"All right! but what became of the coachman with the corpse?" asked Balzac.

At one gulp Vidocq swallowed the glass of rum placed beside him a few minutes before, and with the same deliberate movement with which he had certainly greeted the departure of M. de Karls . . .'s corpse . . . , in the darkness of the Pont-Neuf, he answered:

"You are too accustomed to draw conclusions from given situations not to see what happened in the Rue Saint-Florentin, after the coachman, his carriage stopped, came down and opened the door. He thought at first that M. de Karls . . . was asleep, and was not much surprised, knowing the state in which he had picked him up on the Pont-Neuf; but after shaking him again and again, and seeing that he did not move, he realized that something strange had happened; and that his passenger was not just asleep. He rang the bell of the house mentioned by

one of the men who had given his strange passenger into his charge. The door opened; he entered and told the porter what had happened. The latter ran to the door of the carriage, and, in the light of one of the cab's lanterns, held by the coachman, he recognized M. de Karls . . . , although death had disfigured him considerably. What was the meaning of his great pallor, his immobility, the stiffness of all his limbs. Meanwhile the porter's wife was awakening the servants of the young Hungarian officer. The whole house was soon in a great state of agitation. Asked by M. de Karls . . .'s valet, the cab driver answered what you already know: that the fare had, in a state of complete intoxication, entered his cab, in the middle of the Pont-Neuf, that he had been accompanied by two other musicians as drunk as himself, that, after putting their companion into the cab, they had gone away singing. That was all. Indeed, that was all.

"As for the dead man, he was carried to his room and deposited upon the bed. I had kept my word to the Countess Hélène de B . . . ; I had fulfilled to the letter the promise I had made her in the prefect's study. The next day, the story of the incident was told, in almost the same words, in the evening papers."

"Ah! there are newspapers in this affair!" Balzac interrupted.

"Of course . . ."

"Indeed, I should have been astonished that they had not already shown their noses, which I would like to put at the back of their heads."

Balzac never missed even the least favorable opportunity to abuse the newspapers.

"And what did the amiable papers do with it? Doubtless they gave publicity to something that did not want any."

"How right you are not to like them, Monsieur de Balzac! You can't imagine the injury they do to the police by spreading details in advance, a thousand details which warn the culprits and keep them on their guard. How can police work be done well, or even at all, in a country where such indiscretions are allowed? If, as soon as a thief is the object of a police hunt, you tell him, through the newspapers, that he has been seen in Orléans, dressed as an itinerant mender of pots, that, some days later, he went through Tours on his way to Nantes, where he hoped to embark, so as to put the ocean between France and himself, it is inevitable that the thief, without being very clever, will leave as soon as possible the enchanting banks of the Loire, and that he will embark from Brest or Bordeaux, or else won't embark at all, and we will have missed capturing him, because of the ridiculous and idiotic use of this excessive publicity."

"— It is true," said Balzac in his turn, happy at this unexpected anathema against newspapers,

his *bête noire*, "it is true that there is not much use in having a secret police, when the newspapers are allowed to say everything, to uncover everything, about police affairs; it is useless to have gendarmes who can only go ten or twelve leagues a day, when the newspapers penetrate everywhere, from cabaret to cabaret, spreading the news as fast as water spreads in a flood. It is stupid! It might be as well to print for a subscription notice renewal, in the papers themselves, instead of the ordinary formula, this one, more logical and more complete: 'Gentlemen thieves and scoundrels of all conditions; gentlemen flying from justice, gentlemen suspects or jail-breakers, are asked to renew their subscriptions, to avoid any delay in the forwarding of this sheet and the numerous annoyances from justice, on whose moves we are always careful to keep them posted, with our accustomed accuracy and celerity.'"

"— That's it!" cried Vidocq, who was enthusiastic at Balzac's joke, which was really full of common sense, and who embroidered upon it, in a way which we can't reproduce here, because our memory did not engrave faithfully enough his vivacious sentences, so picturesque in his Rabelaisian mouth.

"But let us go on," said Vidocq. "The next day, the event was reported thus in the newspapers: 'A noble and rich foreigner, young M. de Karls . . . , the only and brilliant heir of one of the most ancient

Hungarian families, died of a stroke in a hired carriage, last night between five and six in the morning, while returning to his home in the Rue Saint-Florentin. We cannot praise too strongly the aid given to that young man — although uselessly, — by the honest coachman, as soon as he saw the awful misfortune which the hazards of his profession had made him witness. After knocking in vain at the doors of several pharmacists on the way, he gave to the servants of the magnificent town house inhabited by M. de Karls . . . , in the Rue Saint-Florentin, the corpse he had brought back. That was not all. It was impossible to make the driver accept any reward, and he left as silently and sorrowfully as if it had been a personal catastrophe. So much humanity and so much unselfishness surely cannot be unnoticed by the authorities, always kindly to their subordinates.' But here," Vidocq went on, " is something more serious.

" Two days later, the newspapers announced: 'Tomorrow the funeral of M. de Karls . . . will take place at the Madeleine . . . The numerous friends of that young foreigner, so prematurely taken from Parisian society, will piously be present. His body will be taken to Hungary, after the religious ceremony at the church, which will begin at twelve.'

" I won't tell you what happened to the Countess de B . . . when she had left police headquarters,

for the simple reason that I have never known. However, it is quite probable that the marquis' return was effected without any untoward incident; nothing has ever permitted me to suppose the contrary. The countess, even if she did not reach home before her husband, had the time, and the opportunity to go to her own apartment and to make a toilet in harmony with the pretext she would naturally use to explain her absence, a ball, or a party. It was easy, as it will always be easy for ladies of high society, accustomed to live, in spite of conjugal community, in complete independence. But the strength of will she showed during the crisis was put to a much more severe test several days later.

"Madame de B . . . was obliged, because of the official relations of the Count with the Austrian embassy, to go in mourning to the service for the dead at the Madeleine. She could not use illness as an excuse; prudence demanded audacity, temerity, a temerity which perhaps cost her her life.

"For two hours, her eyes centered upon a black hanging, her heart torn by the touching but harrowing voices, for two hours which were two eternities, she drank in the spectacle of her lover dead before her, without being able to cry, complain, moan or pray at the corner of his coffin, without being able to shout to her beloved dead: 'Good-bye! Good-bye! Good-bye!'

"She was condemned to the martyrdom of indifference, to the torture of dignity.

"Already God was punishing her cruelly enough, for tears were forbidden to her. Her repressed tears were choking her; they poisoned her as they fell upon her heart. She went back to her mansion, never to come out of it. Her sorrow became melancholia, her sadness weakness. Then came illness, then the doctors; they gave a name to the sickness; a Latin or a Greek name. You can choose: hypertrophy of the heart, I believe. Yes, her heart was sick, but the illness was love. The poor Countess Hélène de B . . . had lived for love; her love killed her, and she died. What would you? Only great passions are logical in this world: so they kill. Small sentiments jog along.

"Before dying, Countess Hélène quietly settled her affairs; her kind maid, the courageous Honorine, helped her with her trustworthy discretion. Caron (you remember the usher at the police headquarters), Caron got a big sum as a compensation for the pension that could no longer be paid to him, as the countess was dead. Honorine was not forgotten; she did not need to go into service any more; she lives today in retirement at Vilvorde, in a pretty house she bought; I received, through Honorine, this magnificent ring; look! it is worth two thousand francs. But, were it worth a million, I would rather part from my head. It is riveted to my finger. It is

the only thing which has ever been riveted, whatever people may say. I choose to be the galley-slave of that souvenir."

Vidocq showed us, with the pride of the ex-detective and a certain senile sensibility, which is always moving, the beautiful diamond set in the gold ring on his finger.

"From this battle of life, there remained only the husband," Balzac pointed out; "two people out of three had disappeared. It seems to me that I have heard that after visiting, some years ago, the two Americas, the count of B . . . had settled in Dalmatia, where he owned vast estates which he managed himself, although he had already a considerable fortune and no children."

"It is true. He retired to Zara, which he left, once or twice as year, to go to Trieste. To amuse himself much more than to increase his income (because as you say, he did not need to devote his life to the prosperity of his heirs, for he had none), he had an interest in a powerful maritime insurance company created by the principal merchants of that rich city. It was generally at the time when the most celebrated Italian singers go to Trieste to give the most fashionable operas, that he was accustomed to go, for he always kept a very keen taste for good music. He was one of the faithful habitués of the Opera, where he had his box all the year round. It was his only pleasure. Sad, lonely, going nowhere, music

seemed to console him in the sorrow he carried everywhere with him. I have had these details from the foreign office, whose files are open to the secret police, as you know, and put at our disposal to complete our informations about citizens living abroad. It was during the performance of an opera, that he heard, in a box near his, a Frenchman, who had arrived a short while before in Trieste, tell almost aloud to some Maltese merchants who were praising the beauty of the prima donna, that she looked extraordinarily like the Countess Hélène de B . . . , a great lady, he added, very well known in Paris, whom her husband had poisoned, because he suspected her of unfaithfulness, although she was supposed to have died of a lingering illness. He entered into other details, exceedingly painful to the count, who let the act reach the end without showing the least emotion to his neighbours in the box; but, during the interval, he knocked at their door, and through the half-open door he slipped his card to the Frenchman, a witty traveller, a charming tourist, a delightful talker. Upon this card were indicated a place and an hour for the next day. Then he bowed and re-entered his box, where he listened quietly to the rest of the Opera. The mastery of the count with the sword was known: the sword had been chosen for the duel.

"After disarming his adversary three or four times and giving himself the pleasure of marking

zigzags upon his chest, he cried, throwing himself upon the sword held in front of his: 'That's enough!' He had uncovered his breast and was run through at the spot he had chosen, so to speak, his heart. The count had wished to commit suicide by another hand than his. That's the end of the story of Count de B . . . and of his wife's love for the young Hungarian officer."

"That end," said Balzac, who was a little amazed and rather moved by the great simplicity of the story (I could see that in spite of his usual reluctance to praise) and who also saw that it had no need of the gracefulness, often so parasitical, so precious, of details; "that end does not satisfy me as well as the rest; something is missing . . . something is necessary . . . I wish that . . . if the count knew nothing of the sudden death of M. de Karls . . . in his house, in his apartments, upon his sofa, at his wife's feet, and it was not possible for him to know one word of it, unless the chief of police, you or Honorine, the maid, had talked indiscreetly, I don't see why . . ."

Vidocq gesticulated protestingly, and cried:

"No one ever spoke of it! No one! And if I am speaking of it today, it is because I have a right to; if I am speaking of it, it is because the principal personages, the only ones interested in the keeping of the secret, have been dead a long time."

"—Well, then," Balzac went on, "I say that

this duel, this suicide by the hand of another, as you call it, is not sufficiently justified. If I chose to tell this domestic drama in my manner, I would seek, I would invent, I would imagine a fuller and more logical end; not that I don't find the death chosen by the count very possible, very real, in its originality; but, once again — and I come back to that — the count's despair is too great if he were ignorant of what had happened in his home. You can see," said Balzac, interrupting himself, "that your story is not the philosophical peach that you were pretending to have brought to me, that you supposed to exist, a ready-made story which it is only necessary to gather and eat."

"— Well!" Vidocq went on, a little disconcerted by the triumphant tones of Balzac, "if my peach is not as round as you wished, it is not far from being so. If I told you of it, it was only, believe me, to give you a lesson in literature. The idea came to me much more modestly than that; the thing happened differently in my mind. A small explanation, I see, is not amiss. I took a hired carriage to come here. As I got into it, whom did I recognize in the driver?"

"— The driver of the Pont-Neuf?"

"Himself, my dear Monsieur de Balzac."

"It is strange."

"No! drivers rarely become colonels. They die drivers. Mine, for instance, has aged. Seeing him

awoke my memories and all the facts buried under those memories. They were loosed like a flight of magpies hidden in the corn, and began speaking, shouting, chattering under the ceiling of my brain. Good! I told myself, I'll amuse myself by unrolling this piece of my past to M. de Balzac. He'll see if there is something in it."

"You say," went on Balzac, without hearing one word of the last sentences of Vidocq, "that that driver brought you here?"

"Yes."

"And why did you not take his number?"

"Why should I?"

"Oh! you are a great . . ."

"A great what? . . .

"Anything you like."

"Why should I have taken his number? . . . I kept the cab."

"You have kept it?"

"Yes, it is going to take me back to Paris."

"So it is in the Rue Basse?"

"At your door."

"Please oblige me," said Balzac to Madame X . . . , "by going down and telling the driver to come here; I want to speak to him."

And Balzac, after passing his hand through his hair without making it straighter, and after throwing his napkin into the air, a great sign of joy on his part, prepared to receive the driver with dignity.

He gathered all the glasses he found within reach and filled them to the brim with wine and liqueurs.

We heard the wooden shoes resounding on the double system of stairs, a descending ladder, an ascending one, which led to his lodgings.

"Don't tell him I am Vidocq," said Vidocq to Balzac; "it might make him shy."

"And you, don't tell him I am Balzac, he might mention it, and it is unnecessary for anyone to know the parrot stick on which I perch."

The driver entered. He was a coachman like all coachmen from forty-five to fifty; forehead wrinkled from the open air, a red nose, mouth deformed by his pipe, greyish red hair, bent shoulders.

"Drink this to your health, my good man," said Balzac to him. "It is warm and you have been a long time on your pins."

After making a sweeping gesture which delivered the glass to its natural destination, the coachman said, as he was about to drink:

"I cannot say no to that. It is thirsty weather today."

"I am not mistaken," said Vidocq, after the driver had drunk five or six other healths: "it was you I took the other night on the Pont-Neuf?"

The driver lifted his red nose.

"What other night?"

"You don't remember."

"No . . . the other night? . . ."

"There were three of us singing?"

"When was that? I pick up so many people who sing."

"It is ten or twelve years ago," answered Vidocq.

"You call that the other night?"

"A little more, a little less. But you'll remember . . . I'll help you to."

"It will be difficult. I do not remember even ten days ago."

"We stopped you at the statue of Henri IV."

"A hundred thousand times I have taken fares where you say."

"It was four in the morning: now do you remember?"

"It means nothing to me."

"Drink again, my good man," said Balzac to the driver: "it is chartreuse."

"I have been told that it is cognac made by archbishops. To your good health!"

"Thanks."

Vidocq went on:

"We gave you a five-franc piece."

"That's more unusual. It is funny, I have forgotten! Ten years ago!"

"The person who got in went to the Rue Saint-Florentin."

"Rue Saint-Florentin! . . ."

The cab driver seemed to be dazzled by the name of that street.

"Yes, the Rue Saint-Florentin . . . a big mansion . . . You had a surprise when you opened your cab."

The driver was even more dazzled.

"What did you find instead of the fare who had climbed in at the Pont-Neuf?"

"Well, a corpse! That's what you wanted me to say? That's not so very astonishing. Perhaps it was you who made me that beautiful present?"

Vidocq laughed.

The driver was growing angry. Vidocq looked at him quietly, straight in his eyes. He became as tame as Martin's lions when the famous lion tamer looks at them.

"Then, since it was you," went on the driver, "since the dead man belonged to you . . . you owe me forty *sous*."

"How do I owe you forty *sous?* I gave you five francs for your drive."

"I don't deny that; but moving the gentleman and carrying him from the carriage to his room, and the never ending questions, and all the rest. The business took more than an hour, and I was paid by the drive, not by the hour."

"Why did you not ask for those forty *sous* from the household?"

"Well, really! the servants in big mansions are all great thieves, and would never give them to me. But I went to the Rue Bellechasse."

The four of us were now as dazzled as the driver; and we shouted:

"Rue Bellechasse!"

"Yes, to the Countess of . . . to the Duchess of . . . , damn! I don't remember her name."

"And why did you go there? Who told you to . . . ?"

"Ah, there you are! I had found a very small pocket-book of gilt leather in my cab, that morning when I had taken the dead man to Rue Saint-Florentin. That pocket-book must have been his."

We looked at each other, terrified by this strange tale of the driver whose memory had come back.

"And what was in that pocket-book?" asked Balzac, who held his wolf by both ears and would not let him go. "A letter addressed to that countess or duchesse in the Rue Bellechasse. That's all there was: no bank notes or I would have given them back. I told you I wanted my forty *sous*. I went to the mansion, and I gave the letter to a gentleman and a lady who were getting into a carriage. The gentleman, a good-looking man with decorations galore and white hair, took the letter; I told him: 'Forty *sous*, please.' He read the letter, and became as white as the paper. After that, he told the footman to give me forty sous. The footman gave me a forty-*sou* piece."

"Well, now the story is complete," said Balzac. "The husband learned from that letter that M. de

Karls . . . was his wife's lover. The scene in the theatre of Trieste proved to him that the world knew his misfortune, and he decided to die. The story is complete."

"No, no; it is not complete," said the driver, thinking that no great interest was shown in him: "I went three times to the mansion in the Rue Bellechasse to claim my due, but there was no one there!"

"To claim what?"

"My due."

"You had been paid."

"The forty-*sou* piece was no good."

THE END